

Guardians of Siberia

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Taiga

In the vast, unforgiving expanse of Siberia's taiga, where the wind howls like the spirits of forgotten ancestors and the snow blankets the earth in eternal silence, lived the Aiyy Clan—a resilient tribe of reindeer herders descended from the ancient Yakut and Evenki peoples. Their world was one of harmony and peril, woven from the threads of shamanic visions, animistic reverence, and the relentless grip of nature's fury. The Aiyy believed that the land itself breathed, its rivers veins of icy lifeblood, its forests labyrinths guarded by carved tree spirits with watchful faces etched into ancient larch trunks. These wooden sentinels, adorned with runes of protection—symbols pecked into stone by elders under the guidance of the stars—stood as portals between the realms of the living, the dead, and the unseen.

At the heart of the clan was Aysen, a weathered shaman in his fortieth winter, his face lined like the cracked bark of a sacred birch. Clad in a costume of reindeer antlers and bear skins, stitched with beads that clattered like distant thunder, Aysen was the bridge to the lower worlds. His eyes, sharp as an eagle's talon, had seen the abaahy demons in fevered dreams induced by the sacred fly agaric mushroom, its red cap a gateway to visions where one-eyed horrors whispered secrets of the underworld. Aysen's young apprentice, Kyunney—a fierce woman with hair black as raven feathers—learned at his side, her spirit as wild as the Lena River's rapids. And watching over them was Elder Dulma, a storyteller whose voice carried the weight of generations, her tales blending the clan's harsh reality with mythic folklore passed down through oral epics like the Olonkho.

On a moonless night, as the clan huddled in their chum tents pitched amid the frozen tundra, the first whispers of danger stirred. Deep beneath the earth, in vast tunnels honeycombing the permafrost, dwelled the Ant and Lizard People—ancient allies or treacherous foes, depending on the stars' alignment. The Aiyy had long communicated with them through rhythmic drumbeats and offerings of fermented mare's milk, descending into shadowy caverns to trade knowledge for survival wisdom. But tonight, as Aysen chewed the dried fly agaric by the flickering fire, a vision crept upon him: dark creatures, born of the abaahy's malice, slinking through the deep forests to hunt the unwary. Their eyes glowed like embers, claws silent on the snow, drawn by the scent of human fear.

Aysen's body jerked as the fly agaric took hold. The fire's flames stretched upward like the branches of the great World Tree, and the smoke carried him downward—deep into the frozen earth where no light dared linger. In the vision, he stood at the mouth of a vast tunnel, its walls glistening with hoarfrost and etched with ancient stone runes that pulsed faintly, as though alive. From the darkness came the low, rhythmic clicking of the Ant People—small, chitin-armored beings with many jointed limbs and eyes like polished obsidian. Beside them slithered the Lizard People, their scaled skins shimmering green and copper, tongues tasting the cold air. They had been allies once, trading secrets of hidden springs and

safe passages through the permafrost for offerings of reindeer blood and sacred mushrooms.

But tonight their voices were different—hollow, edged with hunger.

“The balance breaks,” they hissed in unison, their words echoing inside Aysen’s skull.

“The abaahy stir below. Their one-eyed children climb toward the surface, drawn by the warmth of your fires.”

A grotesque shadow detached itself from the tunnel’s depths: a towering abaahy with iron teeth gleaming, its single eye burning red as it dragged a stolen soul behind it like a broken sled.

Aysen awoke with a gasp, sweat freezing on his brow despite the bitter cold. The clan’s reindeer snorted uneasily in their corral, sensing the disturbance. Kyunney knelt beside him, her hand steady on his shoulder.

“What did you see, old one?” she whispered, her breath clouding in the firelight.

“Death walks the forest tonight,” Aysen rasped, rising unsteadily.

“The dark creatures come. We must warn the others.”

Elder Dulma, wrapped in a thick fox-fur coat, emerged from her tent, her wise eyes reflecting the dancing flames. She had heard the shaman’s cry and already knew what must be done.

“Gather the drums,” she commanded softly.

“The spirits will listen only if we dance.”

The clan moved swiftly in the flickering glow of the central fire. Men and women emerged from their conical chum tents, their breath rising like offerings to the indifferent stars. Children were hushed and pulled close, while the reindeer stamped nervously at the edge of the camp, their antlers silhouetted against the vast, snow-laden sky. Kyunney beat the large shamanic drum with steady, increasing rhythm—boom, boom, boom—like the heartbeat of the earth itself. The sound rolled through the frozen forest, calling the spirits and warning the unseen.

Aysen donned his full ritual costume. The heavy reindeer-skin coat, fringed with rattling bones and iron pendants, hung over his shoulders. Upon his head rested the crown of antlers, each tine wrapped with colored threads and tiny bells that chimed softly as he moved. His face was painted with ash and blood from a fresh cut on his palm—an offering to the spirits of the lower world. Elder Dulma stood beside him, holding a bundle of dried herbs that she cast into the flames, sending sweet-smelling smoke spiraling upward.

"Circle the fire," Aysen commanded, his voice deep and resonant, carrying the authority of one who had walked the paths between worlds.

"We dance to strengthen the boundary. The abaahy must not cross."

The clan formed a ring around the roaring bonfire. Kyunney led the dance, her boots thudding against the packed snow as she leaped and spun, mimicking the flight of an eagle. Others followed, men stamping heavily like bears awakening from hibernation, women swaying like willows in the wind. Their voices rose in an ancient song, words in the old Sakha tongue that told of the World Tree and the eternal struggle between light and darkness:

*"O great Ürüŋ Aiyy, white lord of the sky,
Hold back the iron-toothed ones from below.
Spirits of stone and carved larch, stand firm.
Guard our tents, guard our herds, guard our souls."*



Aysen entered the center of the circle, his movements growing wilder as the drumbeats quickened. He twisted and jerked, his antler crown casting long shadows that danced like demons upon the snow. Sweat poured down his face despite the biting cold, and his eyes rolled back until only the whites showed. The fly agaric still coursed through his veins, sharpening his sight into the unseen.

In the trance, he saw them clearly now: the dark creatures creeping between the trees. Tall, hunched figures with elongated limbs and glowing ember eyes, their bodies covered in matted black fur that absorbed the moonlight. They were the children of the abaahy, born

from the deepest tunnels where the Lizard People once ruled unchallenged. The Ant People, fearful of the growing malice, had fled upward, their clicking warnings echoing in Aysen's mind:

"They hunt tonight. They hunger for warm blood."

Back in the circle, Kyunney caught Aysen as he staggered, his body trembling from the vision.

"They are close," he gasped, clutching her arm.

"Three of them. Coming from the north, along the frozen river."

Dulma's voice cut through the singing like a blade.

"Then we meet them with fire and song. No one strays from the light tonight."

She turned to the youngest herder, a boy named Sargylana, barely fifteen winters old.

"Take the fastest reindeer and ride to the stone rune circle at the hill's crest.

Light the signal fire there.

If other clans see it, they will know danger walks the taiga."

The dance continued into the deepest hours, the flames fed with fresh logs until they roared higher than a man's head. The clan's voices grew hoarse, but they did not falter. For in the harsh land of eternal winter, survival was not merely strength of body—it was the unbreakable thread of ritual, story, and shared belief that bound them against the darkness creeping ever closer.

The signal fire on the distant hill flared to life an hour before dawn—a tall column of orange flame piercing the black sky like a spear thrown by the gods. Sargylana had reached the ancient stone rune circle, the sacred place where flat boulders stood in a wide ring, each face carved with swirling symbols that caught the starlight. The boy had piled dry birch branches high in the center, poured a handful of reindeer fat over them, and struck flint until the blaze roared. Now the warning burned bright, visible for many leagues across the frozen taiga. Other clans, if they still kept the old watch, would see it and ready themselves.

Back at the camp, the dance had not ceased. Exhaustion pulled at every limb, but fear kept them moving. The drumbeat slowed to a deep, steady pulse, matching the breath of the earth. Aysen stood motionless in the center now, arms outstretched, antler crown heavy on his brow. His trance had deepened; his spirit walked the borderlands between worlds. Kyunney watched him closely, ready to catch him if his body fell.

Suddenly the reindeer herd erupted in panic. Hooves thundered against the snow as the animals surged against their rope corral, eyes rolling white, nostrils flaring. A low growl rolled through the forest—too deep for wolf, too deliberate for bear. The clan froze mid-step. The song died in their throats.

From the darkness beyond the firelight came the first shape.

It stepped into the flickering glow slowly, as though savoring the terror it caused. Taller than a man, hunched forward on long arms that ended in black claws. Its body was covered in coarse, matted fur that seemed to drink the light. The head was elongated, snoutless, with a single large eye glowing dull red in the center of its face. Iron teeth glinted when it opened its mouth, tasting the air. Behind it, two more shadows detached from the trees, moving in perfect silence.

An abaahy spawn. The dark creatures Aysen had seen in vision now stood before them in flesh.

Kyunney was the first to react. She seized a burning branch from the fire and stepped forward, holding it high.

“Back!” she shouted, her voice fierce and unbroken.

“You do not cross the circle of flame!”

The lead creature tilted its head, the single eye fixing on her. A low, rattling hiss escaped its throat—almost like laughter. It took one deliberate step closer, claws scraping furrows in the frozen ground.

Elder Dulma moved to Kyunney’s side, her old voice steady as stone.

“Remember the tale of Nyurgun Bootur,” she called loudly to the clan, forcing their fear into story.



“When the nine abaahy sons came for the people of the middle world, the great hero bound them with songs of fire and chains of light. We are children of that blood. Sing!”

The clan found their voices again. The ancient words rose once more, louder now, defiant. Drums thundered. Torches were pulled from the fire and brandished like spears. The circle tightened around the vulnerable tents and children.

Aysen’s eyes snapped open. The trance broke as the danger became real. He strode forward, bells on his costume ringing sharply. In his right hand he held his shaman’s staff—carved larch topped with a reindeer skull—and in his left a small skin pouch of dried fly agaric. Without hesitation he threw a handful of the red mushrooms into the flames. They flared with a strange blue-green fire, sending up thick, sweet smoke that billowed toward the creatures.

The lead abaahy spawn recoiled, snarling, as the smoke reached it. The other two hesitated at the edge of the light.

“Spirits of the upper world, hear us!” Aysen cried, his voice carrying over the wind. “Spirits of stone and carved tree, guardians of the Aiyy Clan—drive these thieves of souls back to their tunnels!”

For a heartbeat, everything hung still—the fire roaring, the song rising, the creatures poised to strike. Then, from deep beneath the earth, came an answer: a low, resonant clicking, like thousands of tiny legs on stone.

The Ant People were listening.

The clicking rose through the frozen ground like a distant river breaking its ice. It grew louder, more insistent, until the snow itself seemed to tremble beneath the clan’s feet. The three abaahy spawn paused at the edge of the firelight, their single eyes narrowing as they sensed the shift in the earth’s breath. The lead creature snarled, iron teeth flashing, and took another step forward—only to halt as the ground in front of it cracked open with a sharp, brittle sound.

From the fissure poured a tide of gleaming black bodies: the Ant People, hundred strong, surging upward in perfect formation. Their segmented limbs clicked in unison, mandibles shining like obsidian blades. They were no larger than a man’s hand, yet together they formed a living wall between the clan and the dark creatures. Behind them, larger shapes emerged—Lizard People, tall and sinewy, scales glinting emerald and bronze in the firelight. Their forked tongues flicked, tasting the smoke of the fly agaric, and their slit-pupiled eyes fixed on the abaahy spawn with ancient hatred.

Kyunney’s breath caught in her throat. She had heard the old stories from Dulma—of the time when Ant and Lizard folk walked openly with the Aiyy ancestors, guiding them through

hidden tunnels beneath the permafrost to warm caves where winter could not reach. But no living member of the clan had ever seen them rise in such numbers.

Aysen raised his staff high, the reindeer skull rattling.

"Allies of the deep earth!" he called, voice raw from the trance. We honor the old pact. Blood for knowledge, smoke for protection!"

At his words, two young herders stepped forward and slit the throats of two reindeer from the panicked herd. The hot blood steamed as it poured onto the snow, soaking into the cracks where the Ant People waited. The creatures drank greedily, their bodies glistening darker. The Lizard People hissed approval, one of them—a towering female with a crest of crimson scales—nodding toward Aysen.

The lead abaahy spawn roared in fury and lunged, claws raking the air. But the Ant tide met it first. Hundreds swarmed up its legs, biting through fur and hide with relentless precision. The creature thrashed, smashing dozens beneath its feet, yet more poured from the earth. The Lizard warriors darted forward, long spears of sharpened bone flashing as they struck at the creature's single eye. Black ichor sprayed across the snow.

The second and third spawn charged to aid their kin, but the clan did not stand idle. Kyunney hurled her burning torch into the face of the nearest, forcing it back with a shriek. Men and women formed a line, spears and axes raised, voices rising in the old battle song Dulma had taught them as children:

*"We are born of star-fire and iron ice,
Children of the taiga, keepers of the rune.
No thief of souls shall take what is ours.
Back to your darkness, spawn of abaahy!"*

Elder Dulma moved among the fighters, unafraid, sprinkling powdered fly agaric and dried herbs into the flames to thicken the protective smoke.

"Remember," she shouted over the chaos, these creatures fear the light of shared story! Speak their true names, and they weaken!"

Aysen, drawing on the last strength of his vision, stepped past the Ant wall and faced the wounded lead spawn directly. Its eye bled, half-blinded, yet it towered over him, claws raised for the killing blow.

"Erlik's bastard," Aysen named it, voice steady. "Child of Arson-Duolai, born of stolen souls and frozen malice. You have no place in the middle world."

The creature hesitated, as though the naming burned it. In that moment, the crimson-crested Lizard warrior struck from the side, driving her bone spear deep into its chest. The

abaahy spawn howled—a sound that shook snow from the nearby pines—and collapsed, body convulsing as the Ant People swarmed over it, stripping flesh from bone in seconds.

The remaining two spawn, seeing their leader fall, turned and fled into the forest, pursued by a hissing wave of Lizard warriors and the relentless clicking horde. The night swallowed their cries.

Silence fell, broken only by the crackle of the fire and the labored breathing of the clan. The fissure in the earth closed slowly, the Ant People retreating into darkness. The Lizard female lingered a moment longer, locking eyes with Aysen. She placed a scaled hand over her chest, then pointed to the north—toward deeper tunnels, toward greater danger still unseen.

Then she, too, was gone.

Kyunney sank to her knees in the bloodied snow, exhaustion and awe warring on her face. Aysen placed a trembling hand on her shoulder.

“The pact holds,” he whispered. “But the balance is fragile. The abaahy grow bolder. We must follow the Lizard’s sign—north, beneath the earth, where the true heart of the darkness stirs.”

Dulma looked to the fading stars, already paling with approaching dawn.

“Then we prepare,” she said quietly. “For the journey into the tunnels begins with the next dark moon.”

The days following the attack passed in a blur of grim necessity. The clan butchered the two sacrificed reindeer, preserving the meat in the deep cold while the hides were scraped and stretched for new boots and tent patches. The bones were boiled for broth, and the antlers saved for tools and ritual objects—nothing wasted in the taiga, where winter forgave no extravagance. The snow around the camp was stained dark with abaahy ichor and reindeer blood, but by midday the wind had swept fresh powder over the scars, as though the earth itself wished to forget.

Aysen spent long hours in silence, seated cross-legged on a reindeer skin before the central fire. He chewed small pieces of dried fly agaric slowly, keeping the visions at a low simmer rather than the roaring blaze of that fateful night. Images flickered behind his eyes: endless tunnels branching like roots beneath the permafrost, rivers of black water, and far to the north a vast cavern where something ancient and immense stirred in chains of ice. The Lizard warrior’s gesture haunted him—the scaled hand over her chest, then pointing north. A summons, or a warning.

Kyunney worked beside the other women, mending tears in the chum covers and reinforcing the corral ropes. Yet her mind was elsewhere. She had felt the earth tremble when the Ant People rose, had seen the Lizard spears flash like green lightning. For the first

time, the stories Dulma told around the fire felt real in her blood, not just words. She glanced often at Aysen, waiting for him to speak.

On the third evening, as the sun dipped early behind the larch forest and painted the sky in bruised purples, Aysen finally rose. The clan gathered without being called; they knew the look on their shaman's face.

"The deep dwellers have shown us mercy," he began, voice low but carrying to every tent. "They fought for us because the old pact still binds us. But the Lizard woman's sign was clear. The abaahy grow stronger in the north, in tunnels older than any song we know. If we do nothing, the dark creatures will return—more of them, hungrier. The balance tilts toward the lower world."

A murmur rippled through the people. Elder Dulma stepped forward, her silver braids catching the firelight.

"Then we must answer the summons," she said simply. "Our ancestors descended into the earth when the great winter came and mammoths walked. They traded with Ant and Lizard, learned the hidden paths, and returned with fire in their hearts. The Olonkho speaks of such journeys."

Young Sargylana, still flushed with pride from lighting the signal fire, spoke up boldly.

"I will go. My reindeer is swift, and I am not afraid of the dark."

Laughter—nervous but warm—greeted his words. Kyunney placed a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Brave words, little brother. But this journey needs more than speed. It needs eyes that see in two worlds."

Aysen nodded.

"Three will go. Myself, to speak with the spirits. Kyunney, my apprentice, whose spirit burns bright enough to light the deepest tunnel. And one more—the keeper of stories, so that what we find may be carried back to the people."

All eyes turned to Dulma. The old woman smiled, teeth still strong despite her years.

"I thought you would never ask," she said dryly. "My bones are old, but stories walk lighter than bodies. And someone must remind you young ones not to anger the Ant queens with poor manners."

The clan laughed again, tension easing like breath released after holding too long. Preparations began at once. Reindeer were selected—the strongest and most even-tempered—for the sleds that would carry them to the northern tunnel mouth. Dried meat,

frozen fish, and balls of hardened reindeer fat were packed. Kyunney sharpened bone knives and reinforced her boots with extra sinew. Dulma gathered bundles of sacred herbs, beads, and small carved wooden faces to offer the tree spirits along the way.

That night, under a sky thick with stars that seemed close enough to touch, the three chosen sat together by the fire. Aysen drew patterns in the snow with his staff—runes of safe passage, runes of clear sight.

“Tell us the tale of the First Descent,” Kyunney asked Dulma softly.

“So we carry it with us.”

Dulma’s eyes gleamed. She leaned forward, voice dropping into the storyteller’s rhythm that had soothed generations of children through the long dark winters.

“Long ago, when the sky was younger and the earth still bled from its birth pangs, our ancestors followed the great reindeer migration north. A terrible winter fell—colder than any before or since. The rivers froze so deep that fish slept forever in ice. The people starved. Then came the Ant People, rising from cracks in the ground, clicking messages of hope. They led the bravest—a shaman named Künney, a warrior woman named Sargy, and an elder named Aysen—to a hidden entrance beneath a sacred larch whose face still watches today.

Deep they went, past rivers of black water, past sleeping bears curled in stone cradles. They met the Lizard queens in halls of glowing crystal, and the Ant councils in chambers of perfect silence.

Gifts were exchanged: songs for knowledge of warm caves, blood for maps of safe paths. But the abaahy lord of that time—Uluu Khaan, one-eyed and iron-mouthed—tried to trap them forever in the lower world.

The shaman sang the binding song, the warrior broke the chains with her axe, and the elder told such a powerful story of return that even the stones wept and opened a way upward.

They emerged after forty days, bringing fire-seeds that burned brighter in the cold, and the pact that still saves us tonight.”

The fire crackled. Far off, a reindeer bell tinkled in the wind.

Aysen looked at his companions—Kyunney fierce and ready, Dulma calm as deep water—and felt the weight of ancestors settle on his shoulders like a warm cloak.

“Tomorrow we begin,” he said.

“North, beneath the earth, to find what stirs in the dark—and to remind it that the middle world still has teeth.”

The dark moon rose three nights later, a thin black curve hidden behind thick clouds that promised snow. The Aiyy Clan gathered at the edge of the camp to see the three travelers

off. Reindeer snorted plumes of white breath into the frigid air, their harness bells muffled with rags so no sound would carry far into the forest. Two sleds waited: one laden with supplies—dried reindeer meat, frozen fish, coils of sinew rope, torches of birch bark soaked in fat, and small pouches of fly agaric wrapped in sacred cloth. The second sled carried only furs and a single drum, for the return journey might need speed more than baggage.

Aysen stood tallest among them, his antler crown packed away for the tunnels but his reindeer-skin coat heavy with protective amulets: tiny carved faces of larch wood, iron pendants shaped like raven wings, and a necklace of bear claws taken from a beast he had slain in his youth. Kyunney wore lighter furs for swift movement, her long black hair braided tight and threaded with red beads that clicked softly when she turned her head. A bone-handled knife hung at her belt, and across her back was slung a short bow of horn and sinew. Dulma, bundled in thick fox and wolverine pelts, carried only a walking staff topped with a small carved tree spirit and a leather satchel filled with herbs, beads, and the stories she would need to speak aloud in the deep places.

The clan formed a silent half-circle. No long speeches were needed; words had already been said around the fire. Instead, each person stepped forward to touch the travelers—forehead to forehead, palm to palm—passing strength and memory without sound. When young Sargylana reached Kyunney, tears froze on his cheeks.

“Come back, elder sister,” he whispered fiercely. “I still need to learn the star paths from you.”

Kyunney ruffled his hair roughly, hiding her own tightness in the throat.

“Keep the herd safe, little wolf. When I return, you will guide me by those same stars.”

Elder Nyurgusai, the clan’s head herder, pressed a small stone into Aysen’s hand—a flat river pebble carved with an ancient rune of return.

“So the earth knows you are only borrowing its children,” he said gruffly.

At last the three mounted the lead reindeer. Aysen cracked the reins gently, and the animals leaned into their traces. The sleds creaked forward across the packed snow, runners hissing like serpents. The clan watched until the travelers vanished between the dark trunks of the larch forest, swallowed by the taiga’s endless breath.

For two days they traveled north, following the frozen course of a small river that Dulma said had once been guided by the Lizard People themselves. They moved at dawn and dusk, resting in the deep cold of midday when the sun hung low and pale. At night they camped beneath overhanging banks or in thickets of willow, building small fires shielded by snow walls. Aysen read the stars each evening, tracing constellations known only to shamans: the Great Reindeer, the Three Sisters of Fire, the One-Eyed Hunter who watched the border between worlds.

On the second night, as they shared a meal of frozen reindeer liver and hot broth boiled over a tiny flame, Dulma spoke softly.

“We near the place the old songs call Künney Baia—the Gate of the Sun Woman. A great larch stands there, older than any living memory. Its trunk bears nine carved faces, one above the other, each looking a different direction. Beneath its roots lies the entrance the ancestors used.”

Kyunney chewed thoughtfully, staring into the flames.

“Will the Ant People meet us there?”

Aysen shook his head.

“The Lizard woman pointed north, deeper than this gate. But the great larch is a marker. The tunnel we seek branches from an older passage below it. We must honor the tree first, leave offerings, and ask permission.”

Dulma nodded.

“And we must sing the song of descent. Not loudly—the abaahy listen—but truly, so the carved faces hear our intent.”

Later, when the fire burned low and the reindeer slept curled against one another for warmth, Kyunney lay awake listening to the wind move through the tops of the trees. Somewhere far off, an owl called once, then fell silent. She thought of the clan’s faces as they had vanished behind her, of Sargylana’s tears, of the blood-stained snow after the attack. A quiet resolve settled in her chest like a warm stone.

Whatever waited below—Ant queens, Lizard councils, or the growing heart of abaahy malice—she would face it. The middle world was worth protecting, with its harsh beauty, its reindeer herds thundering across tundra, its children learning star paths around flickering fires.

She closed her eyes, and in the darkness behind her lids she saw the great larch waiting, its nine faces watching the approaching travelers with ancient, patient eyes.

Tomorrow they would reach the gate. Tomorrow the true descent would begin.

They reached the Gate of the Sun Woman at twilight on the fourth day. The great larch rose alone on a low ridge above the frozen river, its massive trunk thicker than three men standing abreast. Snow lay deep around its roots, but the ground beneath the spreading branches was bare, as though the tree’s ancient spirit refused the winter’s touch. Nine faces had been carved into the bark over countless generations, each one higher than the last, spiraling upward toward the crown. The lowest face was weathered almost smooth by time and wind, its eyes mere hollows; the highest, freshly cut within living memory, stared

northward with sharp, fierce lines. All nine watched in different directions, guardians of every path the wind could take.

Aysen dismounted first and knelt in the snow, pressing his forehead to the cold earth. Kyunney and Dulma followed, the reindeer standing patiently behind them, steam rising from their nostrils. Silence hung heavy—no bird called, no branch creaked. Even the wind seemed to pause in respect.

Dulma unwrapped a small bundle and laid offerings at the base of the tree: a strip of dried reindeer tongue, a lock of hair from each traveler braided with red thread, and three perfect white pebbles taken from the river's bed. She sprinkled a pinch of dried fly agaric over them, the red flecks bright against the snow.

Then she began the song of descent, her old voice clear and steady in the freezing air.

*"O nine-faced mother of paths,
watcher of roots and crown.
We come as children returning,
not to take, but to give.
Open the way beneath your heart.
Let the earth receive us gently,
as it once received Künney and Sargy and Aysen of old.
Guard our footsteps in the dark.
Guide our voices back to light."*

Aysen and Kyunney joined on the second verse, their voices weaving with Dulma's in the ancient three-part harmony that only shamans and storytellers knew. The sound rose and fell like breath, curling around the great trunk. For a long moment nothing changed. Then the highest face—the newest carving—seemed to shift. Its carved eyes glinted, and a faint warmth pulsed from the bark, as though the tree itself exhaled.

A low rumbling came from beneath the roots. Snow sifted away in a perfect circle, revealing a dark opening no wider than a reindeer's body. Stone steps, worn smooth by centuries of careful feet, spiraled downward into blackness. The air that rose from the tunnel was not cold, but strangely warm, carrying the faint mineral scent of deep earth and the distant clicking of many small legs.

Aysen rose and turned to his companions.

"The tree grants passage. We leave the sleds and reindeer here—the way below is for feet alone. The animals will wait; the carved faces will guard them."

They unloaded what they needed: torches, rope, food for seven days, the drum, and small pouches of offerings. Kyunney tied a long sinew cord around her waist, handing the other end to Aysen, who tied it to Dulma. In the tunnels, a single lost step could mean forever.

One by one they descended. Aysen first, torch held high, the flame dancing on walls of glossy ice and ancient stone etched with faint runes that seemed to glow faintly in response to their song. Kyunney followed, her hand brushing the wall for balance, feeling the pulse of the earth like a slow heartbeat. Dulma came last, humming softly under her breath, her staff tapping a gentle rhythm on the steps.

Twenty turns of the spiral brought them to a wider chamber where the air grew warmer still. The ceiling arched high, roots of the great larch threading overhead like protective arms. In the center stood a low stone altar, blackened by old fires. Upon it rested a single object: a small, perfectly carved ant of black stone, its legs raised as though in greeting.

Aysen knelt before it.

“We are here, old allies. Guide us deeper, where the Lizard woman pointed. Show us what stirs in the north.”

For a dozen heartbeats, nothing moved. Then the stone ant’s legs twitched—once, twice—and from cracks in the floor rose a soft, deliberate clicking. A living scout appeared, larger than those that had swarmed the abaahy spawn, its antennae waving toward the three travelers. It circled them slowly, tasting the air, then turned and scuttled toward a narrow passage leading northward.

The way was open.

Kyunney felt the weight of the upper world fall away behind her, step by step. Above, the great larch stood sentinel under the stars. Below, the true journey began—into tunnels older than song, toward whatever darkness awaited in the heart of the earth.

She tightened her grip on the sinew cord binding her to the others and followed the clicking guide into the dark.

The tunnel narrowed after the chamber of the stone ant, forcing them to walk single file with shoulders brushing the walls. The air grew warmer and heavier, carrying scents of damp stone, old smoke, and something metallic that made the hairs on Kyunney’s arms rise. Their torch flames burned steady, unnaturally so—no flicker from drafts, as though the earth itself fed them. The scout ant led at a measured pace, its glossy body catching the light with each precise step. Behind it, faint clicking echoed from side passages: distant kin keeping watch.

They walked for hours that felt like days. Time lost meaning in the dark; only the slow burn of the torches and the ache in their legs marked passage. Dulma hummed softly now and then—an old herding song meant to calm reindeer, but here it soothed human hearts. Aysen paused often to touch the walls, reading faint runes etched by ancestors or perhaps by Lizard claws long ago. Some symbols he recognized: protection, alliance, warning. Others were older than any living memory, spirals and angled lines that hurt to look at directly.

At last the passage opened into a cavern so vast their torchlight could not reach the far side. The floor sloped gently downward, covered in fine black sand that crunched softly under their boots. Warm air rose from below, carrying the faint sound of running water. In the center of the cavern stood a circle of standing stones—tall slabs of dark basalt, each carved with a single great eye. The eyes faced inward, watching an empty space where something large had once lain.

The scout ant halted at the edge of the circle and raised its front legs. From the shadows beyond the stones came movement: dozens of Lizard People emerging silently, scales shifting from deep green to bronze as they stepped into the torchlight. They were taller than surface men, lean and powerful, carrying long spears tipped with obsidian. At their head walked the crimson-crested female who had fought beside the clan nights before. Her eyes fixed on Aysen with recognition.



She spoke first—not in words, but in a series of hisses and clicks that somehow formed meaning directly in their minds.

“You came. Good. The pact holds, but barely. Follow.”

Without waiting, she turned and led them across the cavern toward a cleft in the far wall. The other Lizard warriors fell in around the travelers, forming a silent escort. Kyunney felt the weight of their gaze—curious, wary, ancient. One young male with pale jade scales walked close enough that she could see old scars across his chest: claw marks, deep and deliberate.

Dulma leaned toward Aysen as they walked.

“These are the Deep Guardians,” she whispered. “The songs name them children of the First Warmth, born when the earth still bled fire. They do not love the surface, but they hate the abaahy more.”

The cleft led to a steep descent—natural steps of stone worn smooth by countless feet and tails. The sound of water grew louder. Soon they emerged onto a ledge overlooking an underground river, black and swift, its surface reflecting torchlight like polished obsidian. Along its banks grew pale fungi that glowed faintly blue, lighting the way better than their flames. Strange plants—thick stalks with broad, colorless leaves—clustered in the damp, fed by mineral drips from the ceiling.

The crimson-crested Lizard halted at a place where the river widened into a shallow ford. On the far bank rose a wall of worked stone, ancient and massive.

She turned to them again, her mind-voice urgent.

“The Heart Cavern lies beyond. There the Great Prisoner stirs—older than Erlik, older than names. The abaahy serve it now, feeding it stolen souls to break its chains. If it wakes fully, the tunnels will flood with darkness, and your middle world will freeze forever.”

Aysen stepped forward, bowing deeply.

“We come to renew the binding, as our ancestors did. Show us what must be done.”

The Lizard female tilted her head, considering. Then she reached to her belt and drew forth a small object: a shard of red crystal, warm to the touch, pulsing faintly like a heartbeat. She pressed it into Aysen’s hand.

“This is a piece of the First Chain. Take it to the Prisoner’s chamber. Sing the binding song at the center. Spill blood—willing blood—and the chain will strengthen. But beware: the abaahy guardian waits within. It knows you come.”

Kyunney felt ice crawl down her spine despite the warm air. Dulma’s eyes narrowed, but her voice remained steady.

“And if we succeed?”

“The balance holds. The deep dwellers will rise again if needed. The pact deepens.”

The Lizard warriors parted, clearing the path to the gate. The crimson-crested one placed her scaled palm over her chest once more—the same gesture from the night of battle—then pointed across the river.

The ford was shallow, the black water cold enough to burn. One by one they crossed, boots filling with icy liquid, the current tugging at their legs like eager hands. On the far bank, the great iron gate loomed, its bars carved with runes that bled faint red light.

Aysen clutched the crystal shard. Kyunney checked her knife. Dulma began to hum the binding song under her breath, preparing the words that would need to be perfect.

Behind them, the Lizard escort watched in silence. Ahead, the gate waited—ancient, patient, terrible.

They stepped forward into the throat of the earth, toward the heart of the darkness that threatened both worlds.

The iron gate groaned as Aysen pushed against it, the bars cold and slick under his gloves. Runes carved into the metal pulsed with a dull red light, like veins beneath skin, and for a moment the gate resisted—as though testing their worth. Then, with a sound like a long-held breath released, it swung inward on hidden hinges. Warm, fetid air rolled out, carrying the stench of old blood and decaying mushrooms. Beyond lay a tunnel wider than any they had walked, its walls glistening with moisture that dripped in slow, deliberate beats.

They stepped through, and the gate closed behind them with a heavy clang that echoed into silence. There was no turning back now.

The passage sloped steeply downward, the floor rough-hewn stone that forced careful steps. Torchlight revealed carvings: scenes of binding and breaking, of great chains wrapped around a shape too vast to fully depict. In one panel, Lizard and Ant warriors stood shoulder to many-legged shoulder with surface shamans in antler crowns, driving spears into a colossal single eye. In another, the same eye stared back, unblinking, from the heart of a mountain of ice.

Dulma traced one of the carvings with trembling fingers.

“This is older than the Olonkho,” she whispered. “Older than the names we give the gods. The Prisoner was here before Erlik, before Ürüŋ Aiiyy, before the sky and earth separated. It is the hunger that was left when the world was shaped.”

Kyunney shivered, though the air was almost hot now.

“Then why chain it at all? Why not destroy it?”

Aysen answered without turning.

“Because it cannot be destroyed. It is the shadow cast by creation itself. The chains do not end it—they hold the balance. As long as the pact is kept, it sleeps.”

The tunnel opened at last into the Heart Cavern.

It was beyond imagining.

A vast dome of black stone arched overhead, so high the torchlight could not reach its crown. The floor was a lake of dark water, perfectly still, reflecting nothing. In the center rose a mound of ice—ancient, blue-green, veined with red cracks that pulsed like living things. Around it wound massive chains of black iron, each link thicker than a man's torso, driven deep into the stone floor and walls. The chains were covered in frost, yet they glowed faintly, as though heated from within.

And at the heart of the ice, barely visible through the cracks, was the Prisoner.

Only fragments could be seen: part of a colossal limb, jointed wrong; a curve of something that might have been a horn or claw; and worst of all, the edge of an eye—huge, lidless, ancient beyond measure—watching.

Guarding the mound stood the abaahy guardian.

It was larger than the spawn that had attacked the camp, twice the height of a tall man, its body a mockery of human shape. One massive eye dominated its face, blood-red and wet, set above a mouth full of jagged iron teeth. Its skin was black and hairless, stretched tight over bulging muscle. Long arms ended in claws that scraped idly against the stone, leaving sparks. It turned as they entered, the single eye fixing on them with terrible intelligence.

It spoke—not with mouth, but directly into their minds, a voice like grinding ice and rusted metal.

“Surface vermin. You bring the shard. Good. The Prisoner wakes. The chains weaken. Give it to me, and I will let you flee. Refuse, and I will feed your souls to the hunger.”

Kyunney's hand flew to her knife. Aysen stepped forward, the red crystal shard clenched in his fist. Dulma began to hum softly—the opening notes of the binding song.

The guardian laughed, a sound that made the dark water ripple.

“Three mortals. One old, one tired, one young. You think your little song will hold what gods themselves feared?”

Aysen raised the shard high. Its light flared, casting crimson shadows across the ice.

“We do not come to bargain,” he said. “We come to renew what was sworn. The pact of blood and song, of deep earth and middle world.”

The guardian roared and charged, claws raking the air. Kyunney moved first, darting to the side and hurling her torch at its face. The flame struck the creature's shoulder and clung, burning unnaturally bright from the fat and herbs. It howled, swatting at the fire.

Dulma planted her staff and sang louder, words of the old tongue filling the cavern.

“By the nine faces of the larch, by the blood spilled willing, by the chain forged in first fire, sleep again, old hunger. Sleep and dream no more.”

Aysen ran straight toward the mound, dodging a sweeping claw that shattered stone where he had stood. He reached the nearest chain and slammed the crystal shard against it. Light exploded—red and fierce—racing along the iron links like wildfire. The chains groaned and tightened, frost crackling as they pulled taut.

The guardian shrieked and lunged for him. Kyunney intercepted, knife flashing as she slashed at its leg. Black ichor sprayed, and the creature backhanded her, sending her sprawling across the stone. She hit hard, breath knocked out, but rolled to her feet, blood on her lip.

Dulma never stopped singing.

Aysen reached the center of the mound. He drew his own knife and, without hesitation, cut deep across his palm. Blood welled—hot, bright red—and he pressed it to the ice over the Prisoner’s eye.

“By my blood, freely given,” he intoned, voice joining Dulma’s song, “the chain holds.”

The ice flared where his blood touched. The chains sang—a deep, resonant note that shook dust from the ceiling. The Prisoner’s eye blinked once, slowly, then began to close.

The guardian screamed in rage and charged again. But the renewing chains dragged at the air itself. The creature slowed, as though moving through deep water. Kyunney seized a loose length of chain and swung it like a whip, wrapping it around the guardian’s arm. Aysen grabbed another, pulling with all his strength.

Together, bleeding and battered, they hauled the thrashing monster toward the mound. Dulma stepped forward, voice rising to a shout that filled the cavern.

“By story and song and blood and pact—back to silence, servant of hunger!”

The chains answered. They whipped out like living things, wrapping the guardian tight, link by link, until it was bound against the ice beside its master. The creature’s single eye glared hatred, but its struggles weakened as the binding took hold.

The Prisoner’s great eye closed fully.

The red glow faded. The chains cooled, frost thickening over them once more. The dark water stilled.

Silence returned to the Heart Cavern—deep, ancient, peaceful.

Kyunney sank to her knees, chest heaving. Aysen wrapped his bleeding hand in a strip of hide. Dulma leaned on her staff, voice hoarse but triumphant.

The gate behind them creaked open on its own.

The way back was clear. The balance held—for now.

But in the depths, something vast shifted in its sleep, dreaming of the day the chains would rust again.

The journey upward felt longer than the descent, though their legs carried them with the fierce energy of survival. The iron gate stood open behind them, its runes now dark and silent. The black river's glow from the pale fungi seemed dimmer, as though the earth itself exhaled in relief. They crossed the ford swiftly, water tugging less eagerly at their boots, and climbed the stone steps to the great cavern where the Lizard escort waited.

The crimson-crested female stepped forward as they emerged, her slit eyes scanning each of them—Aysen's blood-soaked hand, Kyunney's bruised face and torn sleeve, Dulma's exhausted but steady stance. She placed her scaled palm over her chest once more, then extended it toward them in a slow, deliberate gesture of respect.

"It is done," her mind-voice said, softer now. "The Prisoner sleeps deeper than in many cycles. The chains sing again. Your blood and song have strengthened the pact."

Aysen bowed, exhaustion weighing his shoulders.

"We are honored to serve the balance. But tell us—how long will it hold?"

The Lizard tilted her head, crest flattening slightly.

"Long enough for your children's children to learn the songs anew. But not forever. Hunger does not die; it only dreams. When the surface forgets the deep, the chains rust."

Dulma spoke for the first time since the cavern, her voice rough as gravel.

"Then we will not forget. The Aiyy Clan will teach the binding song to every child born under the stars. And when the dark moon calls again, others will descend."

The Lizard warriors parted, revealing a new path—a wider tunnel lit by clusters of glowing crystals embedded in the walls. The scout ant that had guided them earlier reappeared, flanked by two larger kin carrying small bundles wrapped in pale fungus fiber.

"Gifts," the crimson-crested one explained. "For the middle world. Seeds that grow in cold, stones that hold warmth, and this—"

She handed Aysen a small vial of dark liquid sealed with resin.

"Essence of the deep fungi. One drop in the fire will call us, should the need be great."

Kyunney accepted a bundle herself: a short spear of black bone, light and perfectly balanced, its tip etched with the same eye rune that had watched them in the standing stones. She tested its weight, eyes shining despite her weariness.

They exchanged no more words—surface tongues and deep hisses could not bridge everything—but the meaning was clear. Alliance renewed, trust deepened.

The Lizard escort led them upward through the crystal-lit tunnel, a shorter path than the one they had taken down. Hours passed in silence broken only by footfalls and the occasional drip of water. At last, cool air touched their faces, carrying the faint scent of larch and snow.

They emerged beneath the great nine-faced tree just as dawn bled pale light across the ridge. The opening closed behind them with a soft sigh of earth, snow sifting over it until no trace remained. Their reindeer waited exactly where they had left them, heads raised in greeting, harness bells tinkling as they stamped the snow. The sleds stood untouched, offerings at the tree's roots half-buried in fresh powder.

The great larch's highest face seemed to watch them with approval, its carved eyes catching the first rays of sun.

Dulma sank to her knees, pressing both palms to the frozen ground.

"We return," she whispered, "carrying the weight and the gift of the deep."

Aysen unwrapped his wounded hand. The cut had clotted, but the blood had left a dark stain on his palm shaped almost like an eye. He stared at it a long moment, then closed his fist.

Kyunney looked north, then south toward the distant smoke of their clan's camp.

"We ride hard," she said. "The people must hear what we have seen—every word, every song. The balance holds because we remember."

They loaded the sleds quickly, securing the deep gifts beneath furs. Aysen took the lead reindeer's reins, Kyunney the second. Dulma climbed onto the lighter sled, wrapping herself in warm hides.

As the sun cleared the horizon, painting the snow rose and gold, they turned south. The reindeer leaned eagerly into their traces, sensing home. Behind them, the great larch stood sentinel, nine faces watching the path they had walked and the paths yet to come.

The taiga opened before them—endless, harsh, beautiful. Dark creatures might still lurk in distant forests, abaahy might whisper from forgotten tunnels, but for now the middle world breathed free.

And in the hearts of three travelers rode the weight of ancient chains, the echo of a binding song, and the quiet certainty that when the darkness stirred again, the Aiyy Clan would be ready.

The Aiyy Clan's camp appeared on the horizon like a miracle after seven days of hard travel. Thin columns of smoke rose straight into the clear, frigid sky, and the faint sound of bells carried on the wind as the herd grazed under watchful eyes. When the travelers crested the final ridge, a cry went up from the sentinels—sharp and joyous. Reindeer sleds rushed out to meet them, drivers shouting greetings, children running alongside on short legs.

Sargylana reached them first, throwing himself at Kyunney with such force she nearly toppled from her sled. She hugged him fiercely, ruffling his hair until he squirmed free, cheeks red from cold and embarrassment.

"You're late," he accused, but his eyes shone. "We thought the earth swallowed you whole."

"It tried," Kyunney replied, voice rough with fatigue and something deeper. "But we had good stories to tell it, and it let us go."

The clan gathered around the central fire that evening in numbers greater than memory. Word had spread swiftly along the reindeer trails—other small clans had joined them, drawn by the signal fire weeks earlier and the rumors of abaahy attacks. Tents ringed the camp in widening circles, and the air smelled of boiling broth, sizzling fat, and sacred herbs burning in offering.

Aysen, Kyunney, and Dulma stood together at the fire's heart. Aysen's wounded hand was bound in clean white hide, but he raised it high so all could see the dark stain shaped like an eye.

"We descended beneath the nine-faced larch," he began, voice carrying over the crackling flames. "We walked paths our ancestors walked. We met the Deep Guardians—Ant and Lizard folk—who honored the old pact with blade and blood. And in the Heart Cavern, we faced the hunger that sleeps beneath the world."

Dulma took up the tale, her storyteller's rhythm drawing every listener closer.

"They gave us gifts," she said, unwrapping the bundles from the deep.

Seeds that would grow even in permafrost were passed hand to hand. Warm stones were pressed into cold palms. The black-bone spear Kyunney had been gifted stood planted in the snow beside her, its eye rune catching firelight.

Then Dulma taught them the binding song, note by note, line by line, until every voice in the great circle joined. Children's high voices wove with elders' gravel, men's deep tones with

women's clear ones. The song rose into the star-filled sky, carrying southward on the wind to other clans, northward to the great larch, downward to the listening deep.

When the song ended, silence held for a long breath. Then Aysen spoke once more.

"The chains hold. The Prisoner sleeps. But the deep ones warned us: memory is the true chain. As long as we sing, as long as we tell, as long as we descend when the dark moon calls—the balance endures."

Kyunney stepped forward, placing the vial of dark essence into the fire. One drop, as promised. It flared blue-green, sending up a plume of sweet smoke that twisted upward like a ladder to the stars.

Far below, in tunnels beyond sight, the Ant People paused in their endless work and clicked approval. The Lizard Guardians lifted their crests in salute. And in the Heart Cavern, the great chains settled deeper into stone, frost thickening, the Prisoner's eye remaining closed.

Above, the Aiyy Clan and their gathered kin feasted late into the night. Reindeer meat roasted over open flames, stories flowed like warm broth, children danced in circles mimicking the binding song. Laughter rose with the smoke, bright against the endless winter dark.

Spring would come eventually—thin sunlight, the first green shoots, the great migration northward. Calves would be born, tents moved, stars read for safe paths. Life would continue its harsh, beautiful rhythm.

But now every child knew the binding song by heart. Every herder carried a small carved ant or lizard scale. Every fire would burn a little brighter, fed by memory and vigilance.

The abaahy might whisper again one day. Dark creatures might creep from forgotten forests. But the pact had been renewed in blood and song, sealed by three who had walked the deep and returned.

And in the taiga, under the watchful stars and the nine faces of ancient trees, the Aiyy Clan endured—keepers of the middle world, allies of the deep, children of ice and fire and story.

The darkness slept.

For now.

Years passed like seasons in the taiga—swift, unforgiving, yet laced with moments of fierce beauty. The Aiyy Clan grew stronger, their numbers swelled by wanderers who heard the new songs carried on the wind. Other clans drew closer, sharing grazing lands and fire circles, trading stories of the Descent as readily as dried meat or carved bone tools. The binding song became a lullaby for infants and a dirge for the old, woven into every ritual, every naming, every farewell.

Aysen's hair turned the color of fresh snow, but his eyes remained sharp. He trained new apprentices, passing the antler crown to those whose spirits burned bright enough to walk the borderlands. Kyunney rose as the clan's greatest hunter and guardian, her black-bone spear legendary among the herds. Children followed her like ducklings, begging for tales of the Heart Cavern, and she told them—not to frighten, but to teach. Dulma lived longest of all, her voice growing thinner yet never losing its power. She sat by the fire until her hundredth winter, teaching the binding song line by line until even the reindeer seemed to hum it in their sleep.

The gifts from the deep changed daily life in quiet, profound ways. The pale seeds sprouted in sheltered hollows, yielding thick white roots that stored well through the coldest months. Warm stones were buried beneath tent floors, keeping children's feet from freezing on the hardest nights. And the vial of dark essence hung always above the central fire, its single remaining drop saved for the greatest need.

Dark creatures came no more to the Aiyy fires. Whispers reached them sometimes—of abaahy spawn seen far to the west, of clans who had forgotten the songs and paid in blood—but never again did one-eyed shadows creep close in the deep forest. The pact held.

One spring, when the rivers ran loud with meltwater and the first green veiled the larch branches, Kyunney stood atop the ridge where the nine-faced tree watched. She was older now, braids threaded with silver, the black-bone spear planted beside her like an old friend. At her side stood a girl of twelve winters—her daughter, named Dulmaana after the storyteller who had passed the winter before.

"Mother," the girl asked, pointing north, "will we ever need to descend again?"

Kyunney gazed toward the hidden gate, eyes tracing the path only she, Aysen, and the elder Dulma had walked.

"Perhaps," she said softly. "The earth is patient, little one. Hunger sleeps, but it dreams. When the songs grow faint, when memory thins like old ice, someone must go down and sing them loud again."

Dulmaana considered this, small face serious. Then she began to sing—the binding song, every note perfect, voice clear as a mountain stream. Kyunney joined her, their harmony rising into the bright sky.

Far below, in tunnels lit by glowing crystal, Ant People paused and clicked in approval. Lizard Guardians lifted their crests. And in the Heart Cavern, ancient chains lay thick with frost, the Prisoner's eye sealed in dreamless dark.

Above, mother and daughter sang on, voices weaving with the wind through the nine faces of the great larch. The tree stood taller than ever, a new face already begun by careful

hands—the tenth, carved with features of an old woman whose stories had saved the world.

The taiga stretched endless around them—harsh, beautiful, alive. Reindeer grazed in the distance, tents smoked peacefully on the tundra, children laughed as they learned the star paths.

The middle world endured. The deep world waited. And between them, the eternal nomads kept watch—singing, remembering, ready.

For in the land of ice and fire, balance is not a gift given once. It is a song sung forever.

Many generations came and went beneath the vast Siberian sky. The Aiyy Clan's tents followed the ancient reindeer paths, summering on the green tundra where rivers sang and wintering in sheltered taiga valleys where the great larches whispered secrets to the wind. The binding song never faded; it lived in every throat, from the smallest child learning to walk to the oldest elder breathing final words around the fire. The black-bone spear passed from Kyunney to Dulmaana, then to her daughter, and onward—a lineage of guardians who knew the weight of the deep.

The nine-faced larch grew older, its trunk thickening, bark cracking like wise skin. Young hands added new faces as the centuries turned: an eleventh for Aysen the White-Haired, a twelfth for Kyunney Spear-Bearer, a thirteenth for Dulma the Eternal Voice. Each carving was made with ceremony—offerings of blood and milk, songs rising through the branches until the tree itself seemed to hum in answer. The hidden gate beneath its roots remained sealed, snow drifting over the place where earth had once opened, but the clan never forgot the path.

Far below, the Heart Cavern lay unchanged. Chains thick with eternal frost held the Prisoner in dreamless silence. Ant People tended endless tunnels, their clicking a quiet lullaby against the dark. Lizard Guardians patrolled the deeper passages, crests raised against shadows that sometimes stirred but never broke free. The pact endured—not because the hunger had vanished, but because memory burned brighter than any abaahy malice.

On the surface, life flowed on. Children learned to read the stars from birth, tracing the Great Reindeer across the winter sky and finding safe passage in the Three Sisters of Fire. They herded with songs on their lips, fished icy rivers with bone hooks, gathered berries and roots in brief summers, and carved small tree faces on every camp's guardian larch. Fly agaric was still gathered with reverence, used sparingly by shamans to touch the borderlands and ensure the spirits remained content.

Dark tales still circulated around distant fires—of clans who strayed too far from tradition, who let the binding song fall silent, who paid the price when one-eyed shadows returned. But the Aiyy and their kin clans stood as beacons. Travelers sought their camps for the true

telling of the Descent, for the gifts of deep seeds and warm stones, for the assurance that the middle world remained protected.

And so the eternal nomads continued—moving with the herds, dancing around fires in antler and skin, reading runes on ancient stones, honoring carved trees that watched over their paths. They lived harsh lives, yes—wind-cut faces, frozen fingers, bellies sometimes empty in long winters—but they lived free beneath open skies, bound to earth and deep by threads of story and song.

The abaahy waited in forgotten places. The Prisoner dreamed its slow, patient dreams.

But as long as one voice somewhere in the taiga sang the binding words, as long as one hand carved a new face upon a sacred tree, as long as one descendant of Aysen, Kyunney, and Dulma walked ready into the dark when the moon called—the balance held.

The taiga endured. The people endured. And in the great silence between ice and stars, the song went on forever.

Shadows of the Stone Idols

Millenias later, Far to the west of the Aiyy Clan's grazing lands, where the taiga met the jagged peaks of the Sayan Mountains, lay the village of Khara Uul—Black Hill. It was a cluster of weathered yurts huddled against a sheer cliff face, home to the Khanty people, hardy fishers and herders who had scratched a life from the unforgiving land for generations. The villagers lived in rhythm with the wild: waking with the pale dawn to tend reindeer herds that roamed the mossy tundra, casting nets into icy rivers swollen with snowmelt, and gathering bitter herbs from the forest floor to ward off the spirits' malice. Nature was both mother and executioner here—providing salmon runs and berry thickets in summer, but unleashing blizzards and starving winters that claimed the weak without mercy.

At the heart of Khara Uul was Elder Vasily, a stooped man with a face like cracked leather, his eyes clouded from years staring into campfires and storm clouds. He led the rituals, whispering to the mountain spirits through a drum beaten from stretched reindeer hide. His daughter, Irina, strong-limbed and sharp-tongued, managed the herds with an iron will, her laughter as rare as summer thunder but warm when it came. Then there was young Nikolai, Irina's betrothed, a dreamer with hands skilled in carving wood and bone, who spoke of visions seen in the swirling patterns of river ice. The village buzzed with quiet tensions: old Vasily's insistence on ancient ways clashed with the younger folks' whispers of easier lives in distant trading posts, where Russian merchants offered steel tools and salt for furs.

One crisp autumn morning, as fog clung to the pines like a lover's breath, Vasily gathered Nikolai and two other young men—sturdy Pavel, who herded with Irina, and quiet Timur,

the village's best fisher—at the edge of the forest. The air was thick with the scent of damp earth and decaying leaves, the trees standing sentinel in endless ranks, their branches whispering secrets in the faint wind.



"The old idols crumble," Vasily rasped, pointing toward the sacred grove deep in the woods. "The earth spirits grow restless. We must carve new ones from the black stone of the hill, or the reindeer will sicken, and the rivers run dry."

Nikolai nodded eagerly, his carving knife already tucked in his belt.

"I've seen them in dreams—faces of earth and root, watching from the shadows."

Irina, watching from the yurt door with arms crossed, called out sharply.

"Dreams won't protect you from wolves or worse. Take extra fire—the woods are empty these days, too empty. No birds sing after noon."

Pavel laughed, shouldering his axe.

"Wolves fear us more than we fear them. And if spirits come, we'll offer them water from my flask."

Timur said nothing, but his eyes flicked nervously to the forest's dark maw. The woods around Khara Uul were vast and ancient, a labyrinth of towering pines and birch that swallowed light even at midday. An eerie silence reigned there—no rustle of small beasts, no crack of branches under deer hooves—only the occasional drip of moisture from high

canopies and the distant, hollow cry of a raven. Villagers spoke of it as the Empty Heart, where the land's soul had retreated deep underground, leaving only echoes of malice.

The four men set out, axes and chisels slung over shoulders, a sled pulled by a single reindeer laden with ropes and offerings of milk-soaked bread. As they delved deeper, the light dimmed, filtered through a canopy so thick it turned day to perpetual twilight. Moss carpeted the ground, muffling their steps, and twisted roots snaked across paths like veins of the earth. Nikolai led, humming a low tune to appease the tree spirits, while Vasily muttered prayers to the carved idols they sought to replace—stone figures hidden in a grove, guardians against the lower world's hunger.

By midday, they reached the black hill's base, a sheer outcrop of dark basalt veined with quartz that gleamed like frozen lightning. The air grew heavier, pressing down with the weight of unseen eyes. Pavel swung his axe first, chipping away at a loose boulder, while Nikolai sketched faces in the dirt—broad brows, hollow eyes, mouths open in silent roars.

As the sun dipped unseen behind the peaks, a low rumble shook the ground. Timur froze, chisel mid-strike.

“What was that?”

Vasily's clouded eyes widened.

“The earth wakes. We've disturbed it.”

From the hill's shadow rose a figure—not carved, but living earth. It was a demon made of soil and stone, its body a hulking mass of compacted dirt studded with roots and rocks, eyes glowing like embers buried in peat. Arms like gnarled tree trunks ended in claw-like shards of flint. It let out a groan like grinding boulders, and the forest's emptiness amplified it into a deafening echo.

“Run!” Pavel shouted, dropping his axe.

The earth demon lumbered after them, its steps shaking leaves from branches, the ground cracking in its wake. The men fled into the darkening woods, hearts pounding, the eerie silence broken only by their gasps and the demon's rumbling pursuit. Darkness closed in, turning the forest into a maze of shadows where every tree seemed to reach with bony fingers.

The forest swallowed their cries as the four men plunged deeper into the gloom. Branches whipped their faces, drawing thin lines of blood that froze almost instantly in the chill air. Behind them, the earth demon's pursuit was relentless—a grinding, rumbling advance that shook loose showers of needles from the high canopy and sent small stones skittering across the moss. Each footfall of the creature cracked the frozen ground, as though the taiga itself protested its awakening.



Nikolai ran at the front, heart hammering against his ribs. He knew these woods from childhood hunts, yet tonight they felt alien—paths twisted where they should be straight, familiar clearings vanished into thickets of black spruce. The emptiness Irina had warned of pressed in: no owl hoot, no scamper of squirrel, not even the wind’s usual moan through the pines. Only their ragged breathing and the demon’s earth-shaking steps filled the void.

“Left—toward the river!” Vasily wheezed from behind, his old legs struggling to keep pace. “Water confuses earth spirits!”

Pavel, axe forgotten at the hill, gripped Timur’s sleeve to haul the quieter man along. Timur’s face was pale as birch bark, eyes wide with terror.

“It’s gaining,” he gasped. “I feel it in the ground—like roots reaching for our ankles.”

A thunderous crack echoed as the demon uprooted a young pine in its path, hurling it aside like kindling. Nikolai risked a glance back. In the failing light, the creature loomed taller than before, soil cascading from its shoulders as it moved. Vines and roots writhed across its chest like living veins, and those ember eyes burned brighter, fixed on them with ancient fury. Chunks of basalt formed a crude mouth that opened in a silent roar, exhaling the smell of deep, wet clay.

They burst into a small clearing ringed by ancient birches, their white trunks glowing faintly in the dusk like ghost sentinels. At the center stood one of the old stone idols they had come to replace—a weathered figure half-sunk into the earth, its carved face eroded to little more than hollow sockets and a grim line for a mouth. Moss and lichen covered it like a shroud.

Vasily stumbled to a halt before the idol, dropping to his knees despite the danger.

“Forgive us!” he cried to the stone. “We meant only to honor you with new faces!”

The earth demon paused at the clearing’s edge, its massive form casting a shadow that stretched across the snow like spilled ink. Roots burst from the ground around its feet, snaking toward the men as though tasting the air. Nikolai snatched a burning branch from the small fire ring the carvers had lit earlier—miraculously still smoldering—and brandished it. The flames hissed in the damp air, throwing sparks that died quickly in the oppressive dark.

Pavel, ever practical, grabbed Timur and pulled him behind the idol.

“If it wants earth,” he said, “let the old guardian stand between us!”

The demon took a single, deliberate step into the clearing. The ground buckled beneath its weight, frost cracking in spiderwebs. Ember eyes flared as they fixed on the ancient idol. For a heartbeat, everything stilled—the men’s breath clouding in frozen plumes, the creature’s roots quivering just short of the stone figure.

Then the idol moved.

Not much—just a faint shift, as though the earth beneath it exhaled. Cracks ran through the mossy surface, and from deep within the stone came a low, resonant groan that matched the demon’s own voice. The eroded face seemed to deepen, sockets darkening, the grim mouth opening wider. A wind rose from nowhere, swirling dead leaves around the clearing in a sudden vortex.

The earth demon hesitated. Its ember eyes dimmed, roots retracting slightly into the soil.

Vasily, still kneeling, pressed his forehead to the idol’s cold base.

“Old guardian,” he whispered hoarsely, “we are your children. Drive back this anger born of our haste.”

Nikolai stepped forward beside the elder, holding the burning branch high.

“We will carve better,” he promised the darkness. “Stronger faces. Truer offerings.”

The wind howled louder, whipping snow from the branches overhead. The demon’s form trembled, chunks of soil sloughing away as though its substance weakened. With a final, frustrated rumble that shook needles from the trees, it sank—slowly, deliberately—back into the earth. Roots pulled inward, ember eyes fading to dull coals, until only disturbed ground and a lingering smell of turned clay remained.

Silence returned, heavier than before.

Timur slid down the idol's back, shaking. Pavel let out a long, shuddering breath. Nikolai dropped the branch, which hissed out in the snow.

Vasily rose slowly, joints creaking. He placed a trembling hand on the ancient stone.

"It heard," he murmured. "But it is weary. We must finish the work—properly this time."

Far off, through the empty woods, the first stars pricked the darkening sky. The men gathered what tools they could find, built up the small fire against the coming night, and sat in a tight circle around the old idol. None spoke of returning to the village yet. The forest's eerie emptiness pressed close, and they knew the earth still watched.

Night fell hard and sudden, as it always did in the deep taiga. The last sliver of twilight bled away behind the mountains, leaving only the faint glow of their small fire to push back the dark. The four men sat close around the flames, shoulders touching, eyes darting to every shift of shadow beyond the clearing. The old idol loomed behind them, its eroded face seeming to watch the forest with renewed vigilance. The air was thick with the smell of smoke, damp moss, and the lingering earthy tang of the demon's passage.

No one slept. The eerie emptiness of the woods pressed closer now, as though the trees themselves leaned in to listen. Far off, a single branch cracked—sharp and deliberate—then silence again. Timur flinched at every small sound, his hands clenched around a reindeer-bone knife that looked pitiful against what they had faced.

Pavel broke the quiet first, voice low.

"We can't stay here till morning. That thing knows where we are. It sank, but it didn't die."

Vasily stared into the fire, his clouded eyes reflecting the flames like distant stars.

"Earth spirits do not die. They wait. We angered it by chipping the black stone without full offering. The old idol protected us tonight, but its strength wanes. We must finish the new ones—properly—or it will rise again, angrier."

Nikolai nodded slowly, turning a chunk of basalt in his hands. The stone was cold and heavy, veined with quartz that caught the firelight like trapped ice.

"We have tools scattered back at the hill. And the sled. If we leave now, in the dark, we might reach the river by dawn. Water is our ally."

Timur shook his head fiercely.

"Run through these woods at night? With no moon? We'll break legs on roots or walk straight into its arms. I say we wait for light, keep the fire high, and pray the old guardian holds."

The argument hung between them, sharp as flint. Pavel, ever the pragmatist, sided with Timur.

“Fire and the idol bought us time. We burn everything we can—dead branches, even our extra boots if needed. At first light we go back to the hill, carve quickly, make proper offerings. Blood, milk, song. Then we leave the new idols and run for the village.”

Vasily considered this, then gave a slow nod.

“The middle path. We honor the work tonight here, with what we have. Nikolai—carve a small face on this stone you hold. Not grand, but true. We will set it beside the old one as apology. Then we keep watch in turns, fire burning bright.”

Nikolai drew his knife. The blade scraped softly against the basalt as he worked by firelight, shaping a simple face: broad brow, deep sockets, mouth open as though breathing the earth’s own breath. The others fed the flames with armfuls of deadfall gathered from the clearing’s edge, stacking wood high until the heat drove them back. Sparks rose into the black like fleeing spirits.

As Nikolai carved, he spoke softly, almost to himself.

“Irina will laugh when we return empty-handed of big idols. She’ll say we ran from our own shadows.”

Pavel snorted.

“Let her laugh. I’d rather hear her sharp tongue than feel that thing’s claws.”

Timur, still shaken, added quietly,

“I dreamed of it last night—before we left. A shape rising from the hill, made of the land itself. I thought it was just fear of the dark.”

Vasily placed a gnarled hand on the young man’s shoulder.

“Dreams are warnings, not lies. The earth speaks when we forget to listen.”

Hours crept by. The fire roared, casting long shadows that danced like lesser demons around the clearing. Nikolai finished the small idol and set it carefully at the old one’s base, pouring a few drops of plant oils from Pavel’s flask over both. They sang then—a low, rhythmic chant to the mountain spirits, asking forgiveness, promising better offerings when they returned with the clan.

The night deepened. Cold crept in despite the blaze, frosting their breath and stiffening joints. Watches passed: Pavel first, then Timur, then Nikolai. Vasily claimed he needed no sleep, but his head nodded often.

Near the coldest hour, when the fire had burned low and stars wheeled overhead unseen, Nikolai—on watch—heard it again: a faint grinding, far off in the direction of the black hill. Not footsteps, but a slow shifting, as though soil turned in its sleep. He fed the flames quickly, heart racing, and woke the others with a sharp whisper.

They sat tense, listening. The sound came again—closer this time, accompanied by the soft patter of falling dirt. Roots creaked somewhere in the dark.

“It tests us,” Vasily murmured. “It feels our regret.”

Pavel gripped a burning branch like a spear. Timur clutched his knife. Nikolai stood beside the idols, the new small face gleaming wetly in the firelight.

The grinding stopped.

Silence returned, heavier than before.

Dawn was still hours away, but the men did not sleep again. They fed the fire, sang softly, and waited for the first pale light to creep through the endless pines—praying the old guardian’s strength, and their small act of atonement, would hold until morning.

The first hint of dawn came not as light, but as a slow thinning of the dark—a graying around the edges of the world that let the men see the white breath of their reindeer waiting patiently at the clearing’s edge. The fire had burned down to a bed of glowing coals, and frost glittered thick on every branch. The old idol stood unchanged, but the small new face Nikolai had carved seemed to gleam brighter, as though it had drawn strength from the night’s vigil.

No further grinding had come from the earth. The forest remained wrapped in its eerie emptiness, yet the pressure felt lighter now, as if the land had accepted their apology and withdrawn its anger—for the moment.

Vasily rose stiffly, joints popping like dry twigs.

“We go to the hill at first light,” he declared. “Quickly, quietly. We carve one proper idol—tall as a man, true of face—and set it with full offering. Then we leave this place before the sun climbs high.”

The others nodded without argument. Exhaustion etched their faces, but fear sharpened their movements. They gathered the scattered tools—chisels, hammers, the sled ropes—and harnessed the reindeer. Pavel kicked snow over the coals, burying the fire’s heart. Nikolai wrapped the small carved stone in a scrap of hide and tucked it inside his coat, close to his own heart.

They set out as the sky paled to a cold steel blue. The path back to Khara Uul hill felt shorter in the growing light, though roots still snagged at boots and low branches clawed at sleeves.

Birds remained absent—no raven cry, no chickadee chatter—only the soft crunch of snow under hooves and the occasional creak of leather harness. The men spoke little, saving breath, eyes scanning the undergrowth for any shift of soil or unnatural shadow.

At the hill they worked in grim silence. Pavel and Timur cleared loose rock and prepared a flat base of packed snow and earth. Nikolai chose the largest unbroken boulder of black basalt, its surface veined with quartz like frozen rivers. Vasily stood watch, murmuring constant prayers, sprinkling pinches of dried herbs saved for offerings.

Nikolai's chisel rang against stone—sharp, steady strokes that echoed through the empty woods. He carved swiftly but carefully: a broad, stern face with deep-set eyes that seemed to stare inward to the earth's core, nose wide and strong, mouth set in a line neither smile nor snarl but eternal watchfulness. Roots and vines were suggested in the lower half, merging the figure with the ground it guarded. As he worked, he sang under his breath—the same low chant from the night, asking permission with every strike.

By the time the sun cleared the distant peaks, pale and weak, the idol stood complete: taller than any man, planted firmly on its prepared base. Vasily slit his own thumb with a small knife and pressed blood to the stone's brow. Pavel poured the last of his plant oils over the feet. Timur laid strips of dried reindeer meat and a twist of tobacco at the base. Nikolai placed the small carved face from the clearing into a hollow he had left at the idol's chest—like a heart returned.

They stepped back.

The new guardian loomed against the dark hill, quartz veins catching the frail light. For a long moment nothing happened. Then the ground gave a single, soft tremor—not anger, but acknowledgment. A faint warmth rose from the soil around the base, melting a perfect circle of frost. Somewhere deep below, a low rumble faded into stillness.

Vasily exhaled, shoulders sagging.

"It accepts."

Pavel wasted no time.

"Then we go. Now."

They loaded the sled with remaining tools, turned the reindeer south, and left the hill without looking back. The forest still held its eerie silence, but the oppression had lifted; the trees no longer seemed to lean inward. By midday they reached the river, its surface a dull sheet of ice under thin snow. The reindeer quickened pace, sensing home.

As evening painted the sky in bruised purples, the smoke of Khara Uul rose ahead. Irina was the first to spot them, standing on the cliff path with arms folded, face unreadable until relief broke through. She ran down to meet them, scolding even as she embraced Nikolai.

“Four days for idols you don’t even bring back? I thought the earth swallowed you!”

Nikolai managed a tired smile, leaning into her.

“It tried. But we left a better one in its place.”

Behind them, the village gathered—women with children on hips, men with questions in their eyes. Vasily raised his voice for all to hear.

“The guardian is renewed. The earth is quiet—for now. But we must remember: every carving, every offering, every song keeps the balance.”

That night the yurts glowed warm with firelight. Reindeer stew simmered thick with roots, and stories flowed free. Yet even in the laughter, eyes often turned toward the dark forest beyond the cliff, where the new idol stood watch on Khara Uul hill—silent, stern, and awake.

The taiga kept its secrets.

But for this season, the people of Khara Uul slept safe beneath its ancient gaze.

Winter gripped Khara Uul with iron teeth soon after the men’s return. Snow fell thick and relentless, blanketing the yurts in white drifts that reached the smoke holes. Reindeer pawed through the powder to reach lichen beneath, their breath steaming in the bitter air. The river froze solid, its surface a dull gray highway for sleds hauling firewood from distant stands. Inside the yurts, fires burned day and night, fed with precious dung and twigs, the smoke curling up through the central opening to mingle with the low clouds.

Life narrowed to survival’s sharp edge. Women scraped hides by lamplight, stitching new boots and coats against the cold that could kill in hours. Men checked corral ropes twice daily, singing low herding songs to calm the animals when blizzards howled. Children learned early lessons: how to read wind patterns in snowdrifts, how to find the warmest spot in the yurt, how to listen for the crack of ice that meant danger on the river.

Yet beneath the daily struggle, the village hummed with quieter currents. Irina and Nikolai’s wedding, delayed by the carving journey, now loomed with the spring thaw. Irina worked tirelessly, her hands never idle—mending nets, smoking fish, directing the herders with sharp commands that hid her worry for Nikolai’s lingering dreams of the earth demon. She snapped at him often these days, masking tenderness with practicality.

“You stare at the fire too long,” she said one evening, thrusting a bowl of reindeer broth into his hands. The yurt was warm, crowded with family, the air thick with the smell of boiling meat and wet wool.

“If you see that thing again in the flames, tell it we’ve paid our debt.”

Nikolai smiled faintly, taking the bowl.

"It doesn't speak in fire. Only in stone and soil. And it's quiet now."

Across the yurt, Pavel sat sharpening his axe, glancing at them with a knowing grin. He had courted Irina once, years ago, before Nikolai's quiet skill with carving won her heart. The old rivalry had faded to friendly jabs, but Pavel's laughter carried a slight edge these days.

"Quiet for now," he echoed.

"Wait till spring. When the ground softens, old angers wake."

Timur, seated near the door mending a fishing net, said nothing. The journey had changed him most. Once quick with jokes, he now spoke little, eyes often fixed on the yurt walls as though seeing through them to the dark forest beyond. Villagers whispered he had been touched by the spirit world—marked, perhaps, for something greater or worse.

Elder Vasily held court by the fire's heart, telling the story of the new idol for the tenth time that week. Children clustered around him, wide-eyed, while adults listened with the respectful silence reserved for truths that bordered the unseen.

"The guardian accepted our blood and song," Vasily rasped, pipe glowing in his gnarled hand.

"But earth remembers. Every spring we must return—offer fresh milk at its feet, sing the old words, carve small faces on the birches nearby. Forget once, and it rises again."

A young girl, Vasily's granddaughter Lena, tugged his sleeve.

"Will it chase us if we forget?"

Vasily patted her head.

"Not if we teach you properly. The song lives in you now. Sing it when you tend the calves, when you gather berries. Keep it alive, and the earth stays content."

Outside, wind rattled the yurt covers, driving fine snow through cracks. The reindeer lowed uneasily in the corral—a sign, the old ones said, of spirits walking close. Irina stepped to the door, peering into the swirling white.

"Storm's worsening," she announced.

"Double the watch tonight. And someone check Timur's lines—he left fish drying on the racks."

Pavel rose willingly, pulling on his heavy coat.

"I'll go. Need the air anyway."

As he stepped into the blizzard, Nikolai watched him go, a faint unease stirring. Pavel had volunteered for every hard task since their return—hauling wood, night watches, repairing the corral alone. Was it penance for dropping his axe at the hill, or something deeper?

Irina settled beside Nikolai again, her shoulder brushing his.

"He'll be fine," she murmured, reading his thoughts.

"Pavel's strong. Stronger than most."

Nikolai nodded, but his eyes drifted to the yurt's smoke hole, where snowflakes danced downward like tiny spirits. In the fire's glow, shadows shifted on the walls—shapes that almost resembled broad stone faces, watching.

The winter deepened. The village endured, bound by fire and story against the vast, empty dark. But in the quiet hours, when wind howled loudest, some swore they heard a faint grinding far below the frozen ground—like earth turning in slow, patient dreams.

The storm broke three days later, leaving the world muffled under fresh snow. The reindeer dug eagerly for lichen, their antlers tossing white plumes into the pale sunlight. Smoke rose straight from yurt vents, and the village stirred with the small, fierce joy that follows survival. Women hauled water from holes chopped in the river ice; men repaired sled runners damaged by the wind. Children raced across the crust, shouting songs that echoed off the cliff face.

Irina stood at the corral, counting the herd with practiced eyes. Two calves had been born during the blizzard—weak, but alive, huddled against their mothers. She murmured approval, running a hand over the nearest dam's flank. The animal leaned into her touch, bells tinkling softly.

Nikolai approached from the yurts, carrying a bundle wrapped in hide.

"For the wedding coat," he said quietly, unwrapping it to reveal intricate bone beads he had carved during the long nights: tiny faces of reindeer, ravens, and guardian spirits. "So you carry protection wherever you walk."

Irina's sharp expression softened. She took a bead between finger and thumb, turning it to catch the light.

"You should carve useful things—new chisels, fish hooks. Not pretty trinkets."

But she smiled as she said it, tucking the beads into her pocket close to her heart.

Pavel watched from the woodpile, axe paused mid-swing. He had split enough logs for three yurts, sweat freezing on his brow despite the cold. Seeing Irina's smile aimed at Nikolai stirred something old and sour in his chest. He drove the axe harder into the next log, the crack echoing like a gunshot.

Timur emerged from his small yurt at the village's edge, carrying a string of frozen fish he had checked on the racks. His steps were slow, eyes distant. Since the carving journey, he spent more time alone, walking the river ice at dusk or staring into the forest as though

waiting for something to emerge. Villagers gave him space, whispering he now heard the earth's voice clearer than any shaman.

That evening, the village gathered in Vasily's large yurt for a naming feast of the new calves. Reindeer stew bubbled in a great iron pot hung over the fire, enriched with dried mushrooms and wild onions traded from southern clans. Butter tea steamed in wooden cups, and the air was thick with warmth, smoke, and talk.

Vasily sat at the head, pipe glowing, blessing the calves with sprinkles of milk and low chants.

"May they grow strong as the black hill guardian," he intoned. "May their hooves find lichen through deepest snow, and their bells warn us of spirits walking."

Lena, his granddaughter, piped up boldly.

"Do spirits walk now, Grandfather? Timur says he hears them under the ice."

All eyes turned to Timur, seated quietly near the door. He met their gazes steadily, no longer flinching.

"Not spirits," he said softly. "The earth itself. It breathes slow, like a sleeping bear. Sometimes it shifts in dreams. The new idol keeps it calm, but it remembers we are only guests on its back."

A hush fell. Irina broke it with a practical laugh.

"Then we stay good guests. More stew, less dreaming."

But Nikolai leaned forward.

"Have you seen anything since we returned?"

Timur hesitated, then nodded.

"Tracks yesterday, along the river. Not wolf, not bear. Too wide, too deep. Like something heavy dragged itself from the bank and back into the forest."

Pavel set his cup down hard.

"We should check this at dawn. If wolves or wolverines threaten the herd—"

"Not animal," Timur interrupted gently. "The snow around the tracks was melted, as though warm. And in the center—one quartz vein, like from the black hill stone."

Vasily's pipe paused halfway to his lips.

"The guardian tests us again. Or something else borrows its shape."

Irina frowned.

“We go together tomorrow. No one alone. Nikolai, Pavel, Timur—and me. We follow the tracks, see what walks our land.”

Pavel’s eyes lit with grim purpose.

“Good. I’m tired of waiting for things to come to us.”

Outside, the wind had died completely. Stars burned cold and bright above the cliff, and the river ice gleamed like polished bone. Somewhere in the dark forest, a faint grinding echoed—brief, almost imagined—then silence returned.

In the yurt, the feast continued, voices rising in song to drown unease. But hands gripped cups tighter, and eyes strayed often to the door flap, where frost crept inward like curious fingers.

The earth dreamed on beneath them, patient as stone, waiting to see if its guests would keep their promises.

Dawn the next day broke clear and knife-sharp, the sky a pale, cloudless blue that promised brutal cold. Frost feathered every surface, turning the yurts into glittering domes and the reindeer’s breath into lingering clouds. Irina led the small party—herself, Nikolai, Pavel, and Timur—down the cliff path to the river, their boots crunching through the snow crust. Each carried weapons and tools: Irina her long herding staff tipped with iron, Nikolai his carving knife and a coil of rope, Pavel his newly sharpened axe, Timur a bundle of torches and the bone-handled fishing spear he favored.

The tracks began at the river’s edge, just below the fish-drying racks. They were exactly as Timur had described: wide impressions deeper than any bear, with a dragged furrow between them as though something immense had hauled itself from the water. Snow around each print had melted into glassy ice, steaming faintly even now in the morning chill. At the center of the largest track gleamed a single quartz vein, pale and jagged, unmistakably chipped from the black hill’s stone.

Irina knelt, gloved fingers tracing the edge.

“Too warm for last night’s cold. Whatever made this walked hours ago, yet the heat lingers.”

Pavel gripped his axe tighter.

“Not animal. Not spirit either—this has weight.”

Timur pointed silently into the forest. The tracks led straight between the pines, crushing small saplings and leaving a trail of disturbed earth where frost had been scraped away. The path cut deeper into the Empty Heart than any villager willingly went alone.

Nikolai's face was grim.

"It goes toward the black hill. Back to where we carved."

Irina stood, staff planted firmly.

"Then we follow. Carefully. If it's testing us again, we answer with eyes open."

They moved in single file, Timur at the rear watching their back trail. The forest closed around them quickly, light dimming to the familiar twilight gloom. The eerie silence pressed in—no bird calls, no wind sigh, only the soft crunch of their steps and the occasional snap of a frozen branch. Snow sifted down from high boughs as they passed, dusting their shoulders like warnings.

The tracks grew fresher as they went. Melted patches steamed more visibly, and clumps of dark soil clung to low branches where the thing had brushed past. Pavel hacked away obstructing limbs with short, angry swings, his breath coming hard. Nikolai walked with one hand on his knife, eyes scanning for carved tree faces or old offering sites that might offer protection.

After two hours, the ground began to rise toward Khara Uul hill. The tracks veered suddenly, turning east into a dense stand of ancient spruce where the canopy blocked nearly all light. Irina raised a hand to halt.

"Look," she whispered.

Ahead, half-buried in snow, lay a chunk of basalt—part of the boulder they had chipped weeks ago. It had been dragged here, quartz veins glowing faintly, as though still warm from the earth's heart. Around it, the snow was churned into a wide circle, roots exposed and twisted upward like desperate fingers. In the center stood a crude shape: soil and stone piled into a rough humanoid form, twice a man's height, with ember-like glows where eyes should be.

It was not the full demon they had fled. Smaller. Younger, perhaps. But alive.

The thing turned its head slowly as they approached, grinding like millstones. Loose dirt cascaded from its shoulders. The ember eyes fixed on them, and a low rumble rose from its chest—curious, not yet angry.

Timur's voice shook.

"It's learning. Copying what we made."

Pavel stepped forward, axe raised.

"Then we teach it the lesson again."

Irina caught his arm.

“Wait. It hasn’t attacked. It watches.”

Nikolai moved past them, hands open and empty. He knelt in the snow ten paces from the creature, bowing his head as he would to the finished idol.

“We made the guardian strong,” he said clearly, voice carrying in the stillness. “You are not it. You are echo, not master. Go back to sleep.”

The earth creature tilted its head, embers flickering. For a long moment it stood motionless. Then, slowly, it sank—knees folding, arms collapsing inward, soil and stone slumping into a harmless mound. The ember glow dimmed to dull coals, then vanished. Only the dragged basalt chunk remained, half-covered once more by drifting snow.

Silence returned, deeper than before.

Irina exhaled white plumes.

“It listened.”

Timur stared at the mound, wonder creeping into his fear.

“Or it learns patience.”

Pavel lowered his axe, frustration plain.

“We can’t fight every echo it makes.”

Nikolai rose, brushing snow from his knees.

“Then we make the true guardian stronger. More offerings. More songs. And we teach the children to carve small faces everywhere—on trees, on river stones—so the earth knows we remember.”

They left the mound without disturbing it, marking the spot with a branch stuck upright. On the return journey, the forest felt less oppressive; a single raven called overhead, its harsh cry echoing like approval.

Back at Khara Uul that night, the village listened wide-eyed to the tale. Vasily nodded gravely and declared a new ritual: every full moon, a party would trek to the idol with fresh offerings. Irina organized the herders to carve protective faces on boundary trees. Pavel threw himself into the work, perhaps seeking redemption in labor.

And Timur—quiet Timur—began to sing the old earth songs at dusk, his voice carrying over the river ice, teaching any listening thing below that the people of Khara Uul still honored the ancient balance.

Winter continued its slow march.

But the ground beneath the village slept quieter now, lulled by voices raised in respect rather than fear.

Spring arrived late that year, as it often did in the shadow of the Sayan Mountains. The snow lingered in deep drifts long after the sun grew stronger, and the river ice groaned and cracked before finally giving way to black rushing water. Reindeer shed their thick winter coats in patchy handfuls, and the first green shoots pierced the tundra like defiant spears. The village of Khara Uul stirred with the restless energy of renewal: yurts were repaired, sleds stored, fishing nets mended for the salmon run everyone prayed would be plentiful.

Irina and Nikolai's wedding was set for the first full moon of true spring, when the ground softened enough for dancing without freezing feet. Preparations filled every spare moment. Women dyed reindeer sinew bright colors for embroidery, men carved new drum frames from birch, and children gathered armfuls of early flowers—tiny purple saxifrage and yellow arctic poppies—to weave into crowns. Even Pavel threw himself into the work, hauling fresh logs for the great communal fire and sharpening stakes for the wedding tent.

Yet beneath the joy ran an undercurrent of watchfulness. The earth had been quiet since the encounter with the echo creature, but no one believed the silence permanent. Timur's dusk songs continued, his voice growing stronger and more confident. Young Lena followed him often now, learning the words, her clear child's tones weaving with his deeper ones until they carried far across the river.

One warm afternoon, as meltwater dripped from every branch and the air smelled of wet earth and pine resin, Irina led a small party back to Khara Uul hill for the promised full-moon offering. Nikolai, Pavel, Timur, and Lena accompanied her, sleds laden with fresh milk in skin bags, smoked fish, and bundles of sacred herbs. Vasily stayed behind, his old bones protesting the long walk, but he blessed them at the cliff path with sprinkled milk and stern words.

"Speak true to the guardian," he warned.

"No pride. No haste. The earth feels lies in our footsteps."

The forest greeted them differently this time. Sunlight filtered through budding branches, painting the snow in dappled gold. Birdsong had returned—tentative chirps of returning migrants testing the air. The Empty Heart no longer felt quite so hollow; life crept back into its edges.

At the hill, the great idol stood proud, frost-free now, quartz veins catching the light like living eyes. Snow had melted in a wide circle around its base, revealing dark soil already sprouting tiny green threads. The smaller echoes they had feared did not appear. Instead,

the guardian seemed taller, stronger—roots from nearby trees twining gently around its legs as though embracing kin.

Irina stepped forward first, pouring fresh milk over the stone's feet until it pooled white against black.

"We remember," she said clearly.

"Your watch keeps us safe. Our herds grow. Our children sing."

Nikolai laid the smoked fish and herbs, then drew his knife and carved a fresh small face on a nearby birch—the first of many planned along the boundary. Pavel, silent until now, surprised them by producing a small iron pendant from his pocket: a crude hammer shape he had forged himself over winter.

"For strength," he muttered, hanging it on a notch in the idol's chest.

"So you hold firm when we falter."

Timur began the song, Lena joining boldly. Their voices rose together, echoing off the hill and rolling through the trees. As they sang, a gentle tremor ran through the ground—not anger, but response. Warmth rose from the soil, melting the last patches of snow around the idol. Tiny flowers—pale blue forget-me-nots—pushed through almost visibly, blooming in minutes under the spring sun.

When the song ended, silence fell, peaceful rather than eerie. A raven landed on the idol's shoulder, cocking its head at them before croaking once and flying off.

"It likes us!" Lena laughed in delight.

Irina smiled, ruffling the girl's hair.

"It likes respect. Keep singing, little one, and it always will."

On the return journey, Pavel walked beside Nikolai for the first time since the carving trip. The old rivalry had thawed with the snow.

"You carve well," Pavel said gruffly.

"Better than I ever could. Irina chose right."

Nikolai glanced at him, surprised.

"And you swing an axe like thunder. The village needs both."

Pavel nodded, a weight seeming to lift from his shoulders.

"Maybe. Long as the earth stays quiet, I'll swing it for wood and weddings, not demons."

That night back in Khara Uul, the village feasted under the rising full moon. Drums beat, feet stamped, voices rose in celebration. Irina and Nikolai stood together at the fire's heart,

hands clasped, faces glowing in the flames. Vasily blessed them with milk and tobacco smoke, Timur sang the earth song as backdrop, Lena dancing in circles with other children.

The guardian on the hill watched from afar, stone face unchanging, but the soil around it bloomed richer than any spring in memory.

And deep below, the earth dreamed on—content for now, lulled by songs of respect and the steady heartbeat of lives lived in careful balance with its ancient power.

The wedding day dawned bright and mild, the kind of spring morning the old ones called a gift from the sky spirits. The sun rose clear over the mountains, melting the last frost from the yurt roofs and turning the river into a ribbon of liquid silver. Wildflowers carpeted the tundra in defiant color—purple, yellow, white—while the reindeer grazed contentedly, their new calves gamboling on unsteady legs.

The entire village turned out for the celebration. Yurts were thrown open, smoke holes widened to let in the warm air. A great circle was cleared on the flat ground above the cliff, ringed with fresh-cut birch branches stuck into the earth as boundary markers. At the center burned the communal fire, already stacked high with logs for the long night of dancing ahead.

Irina emerged from her family's yurt at midday, clad in a new coat of white reindeer fur trimmed with the colored embroidery the women had worked through winter. Around her neck hung Nikolai's bone beads, catching the light like tiny stars. Her hair was braided with flowers and red threads, face calm but eyes shining with the fierce joy she rarely showed. Vasily walked beside her, leaning on his staff, pride straightening his stooped back.

Nikolai waited at the circle's edge, dressed in his best tunic dyed deep blue with traded pigments. Pavel stood as his witness, broad shoulders squared, a rare smile softening his usual scowl. Timur held the drum, fingers already tapping a gentle rhythm. Lena scattered flower petals in their path, giggling when the wind caught them and swirled them skyward.

The ceremony was simple, as tradition demanded—no long speeches, only actions that bound lives to the land. Vasily poured fresh milk onto the ground for the earth spirits, then passed the cup to Irina and Nikolai. They drank together, then poured the rest into the fire, steam rising like a bridge between worlds.

Timur began the wedding song, a low, rolling melody passed down through generations. Voices joined one by one until the whole village sang, drums beating in steady heartbeat. Irina and Nikolai stepped into the circle, hands clasped, and began the slow turning dance: three steps sunwise, three steps against, mirroring the eternal cycle of seasons.

Children wove in and out around them, laughing. Reindeer bells tinkled from the nearby corral as the herd shifted, drawn by the music. Even the river seemed to hush its rush, listening.

When the dance ended, the couple knelt before Vasily. He placed a hand on each head and spoke the binding words.

“By fire and milk, by song and flower, by the earth that holds us and the sky that watches, you are one thread now in the great weaving. May your herd grow fat, your children strong, and your songs keep the guardians content.”

Cheers rose, drums thundered, and the feast began. Tables—low planks on stones—groaned with food: roasted reindeer ribs, smoked salmon, boiled roots, butter tea, and rare treats of dried berries reconstituted in milk.

As evening deepened, the great fire roared higher. Dancers formed lines, stamping and turning in patterns that told old stories—of hunts, migrations, battles with spirits. Pavel surprised everyone by pulling Lena into the dance, swinging her high until she squealed with delight. Timur drummed tirelessly, sweat shining on his brow, eyes distant as though hearing harmonies from below the earth.

Later, when the moon rose full and silver over the cliff, Nikolai and Irina slipped away briefly to the riverbank. They stood hand in hand, watching water rush past in the moonlight.

“You think it watches us tonight?” Irina asked quietly, meaning the guardian on the hill.

Nikolai squeezed her hand.

“It feels our joy. Earth likes life—calves born, songs sung, promises kept.”

She leaned her head on his shoulder.

“Good. Let it sleep content. We have enough to fight in winter without waking old angers.”

Far off, a raven called once from the forest direction—sharp, approving. Then silence, broken only by distant drums and laughter from the village circle.

The wedding fire burned until dawn, tended by the young and the tireless. When the sun rose again, it found Khara Uul quiet at last, yurts steaming gently in the warming air, reindeer grazing, and two new lives woven tightly into the ancient pattern.

The earth beneath them lay peaceful, roots drinking deep of spring melt, flowers blooming thick around the black hill guardian.

And in the songs carried on the wind that day, the balance held—strong as new-wed hands, enduring as stone.

Summer swept over Khara Uul like a long-held breath finally released. The sun circled high and reluctant to set, bathing the tundra in golden light that lasted nearly to midnight. Rivers ran full and loud, swollen with mountain melt, carrying salmon thick as shadows upstream. Reindeer scattered across vast pastures, coats sleek and fat on new grass, calves growing

strong under watchful mothers. The village thrived in the brief abundance: fish smoked on racks until the air carried its rich scent for miles, berries gathered in overflowing baskets, hides tanned soft for winter trading.

Irina and Nikolai's new yurt stood slightly apart from the main circle, as custom demanded for newlyweds. It was larger than most, with a fresh birch frame and covers stitched tight against rain. Inside, Nikolai's carvings decorated the walls—small protective faces on wooden panels, reindeer in mid-leap, ravens with spread wings. Irina had hung bundles of dried herbs from the roof poles, their sharp scents mingling with woodsmoke and the faint musk of furs.

Their life settled into a rhythm both ancient and new. Irina rose first each dawn, checking the herds with the same sharp commands that once made Pavel bristle. Now he only nodded when she passed, accepting her leadership without grudge. Nikolai joined the fishing parties on the river, his steady hands quick with nets and spears, but he always carved time to shape small idols for boundary trees or teach the children knife work by the fire.

One long evening, when the sun hung low but bright on the horizon, Irina found Nikolai at the riverbank, carving a piece of driftwood into the shape of a leaping salmon. Lena sat beside him, tongue between teeth as she copied his strokes on a smaller scrap.

"You'll make her a better carver than you," Irina teased, settling on a rock nearby with her mending.

Nikolai grinned without looking up.

"Good. The earth needs fresh hands. Mine will grow old one day."

Lena piped up proudly.

"I'm making a face for the new tree by the corral. So the calves don't stray."

Irina reached over and tucked a stray flower behind the girl's ear.

"Then it will be strong. Your songs already keep things calm."

Timur approached from upstream, carrying a string of fat grayling that flashed silver in the light. He had become the village's quiet oracle—his dusk songs now a fixed ritual, joined by whoever wished. Villagers sought him for advice on planting times or herd movements, trusting the earth spoke clearer through him.

He nodded to Irina and Nikolai, laying the fish on a flat stone.

"River's generous this year. More salmon than memory. The guardian approves."

Pavel joined them soon after, hauling a load of firewood on his broad back. He dropped it with a thud and wiped sweat from his brow.

“Approves enough for a midsummer feast? We’ve wood, fish, berries coming ripe.”

Irina considered.

“Yes. Full moon in three days. We’ll honor the river spirits too—milk on the water, songs for the salmon.”

The feast came on a perfect night. The great fire roared between the yurts and the cliff edge, drums beating slow and deep. Dancers moved in long lines, reenacting the salmon’s upstream struggle and the reindeer’s endless migration. Children darted between legs, faces painted with berry juice in swirling patterns. Vasily sat enthroned on furs, pipe glowing, eyes bright with rare contentment as he watched his granddaughter Lena lead a circle of younger ones in the earth song.

Later, when the fire burned low and the sun dipped only briefly below the horizon before rising again, Irina and Nikolai slipped away to the hill path. They climbed quietly to where the great idol stood, bringing a small skin of fresh milk and a twist of smoked salmon.

The guardian loomed serene in the midnight sun, flowers thick around its base, vines climbing its legs like affectionate children. Quartz veins caught the low light, making the eyes seem truly alive.

Irina poured the milk slowly over the stone feet.

“For continued plenty.”

Nikolai laid the salmon and pressed his palm to the idol’s chest, where Pavel’s iron hammer still hung.

“For strength in our union, in our people.”

A soft tremor answered—gentle, almost a sigh. Warmth rose from the ground, carrying the scent of deep, fertile soil.

They stood hand in hand a long moment, listening to faint drums and laughter drifting up from the village below.

“The earth is content,” Nikolai murmured.

Irina leaned her head on his shoulder.

“Then so are we.”

Far below, the river rushed on, salmon leaping silver in the endless light. Reindeer grazed peacefully. Songs rose into the vast sky.

And on Khara Uul hill, the guardian watched—stone face unchanging, but the land around it blooming richer than any summer before.

Balance held, woven from respect, song, and lives lived close to the earth's slow, patient heart.

Autumn crept in on silent feet, painting the taiga in fire and gold. Birch leaves turned brilliant yellow, larch needles a deeper green before their brief blaze of orange. Berries hung heavy on bushes—cranberries red as blood, cloudberry pale and sweet—gathered in frantic haste before the first frosts. Reindeer grew restless, coats thickening, sensing the long migration southward to winter grounds. The river slowed, its salmon run spent, leaving racks of smoked fish stacked high against coming hunger.

In Khara Uul, the rhythm shifted to preparation. Women rendered fat into lamps, men sharpened sled runners and repaired harnesses. Children helped where they could—picking the last herbs, twisting sinew into thread, learning to read the sky for signs of early snow. The brief summer's ease gave way to the focused urgency that carried the village through the dark months.

Irina discovered she was with child one crisp morning, feeling the first faint flutter while checking the herd. She told Nikolai quietly by the river, her hand pressed to her belly, eyes fierce with the same determination she brought to everything.

"A strong one," she said. "Kicking already, like it wants to run with the reindeer."

Nikolai's face broke into wonder, then worry. He pulled her close, breathing in the scent of smoke and pine in her hair.

"We'll make the yurt warmer. More furs, better smoke hole. And I'll carve protectors—small faces for the cradle board."

She laughed softly.

"Carve all you want. But this child will learn to herd before it walks."

Word spread quickly. Vasily blessed them with milk and tobacco, eyes misty. Pavel clapped Nikolai on the back hard enough to stagger him, grinning wide. Timur sang a new verse into his dusk songs—one for unborn life, asking the earth to cradle it gently. Lena danced in excitement, declaring she would teach the baby all the songs first.

Yet even in joy, the village remained watchful. Timur's dreams grew restless as nights lengthened. He spoke of them one evening around the central fire, voice low over the crackle of flames.

"The earth turns in its sleep," he said. "Not angry—curious. It feels new life coming, like a calf in spring. It watches closer now."

Pavel, sharpening his axe nearby, grunted.

“Let it watch. We’ve kept faith. Offerings on time, songs every dusk, faces carved on every new tree.”

Vasily nodded from his furs.

“Still, we go to the hill at the dark moon. Extra milk, extra smoke. Ask blessing for the child.”

The trek took place on a night when clouds hid the stars and wind moaned through the pines. Irina stayed behind—too far along for the long walk—but sent her own offering: a lock of her hair braided with red thread. Nikolai carried it, along with milk, fat, and herbs.

At the hill, the guardian stood wreathed in fallen leaves, flowers long gone but moss thick and green at its base. The quartz eyes gleamed faintly in torchlight. They poured offerings slowly, sang the earth song with extra verses Timur had woven for new life.

As the last note faded, the ground gave a deep, resonant thrum—like a heartbeat far below. Warmth rose, strong enough to melt frost from the idol’s shoulders. A single yellow leaf, somehow still clinging to a nearby birch, drifted down and settled at the stone feet.

Nikolai pressed the braided lock into a crevice at the idol’s chest, beside Pavel’s iron hammer.

“For our child,” he whispered. “Strong roots, steady heart.”

They left lighter, the wind seeming to gentle around them on the return path.

Winter closed in soon after. Snow fell thick and silent, blanketing the world in white. The village hunkered down, fires burning constant, stories flowing to pass the long nights. Irina grew rounder, moving slower but never idle—directing herders from the yurt door, planning spring pastures.

And in the quiet hours, when wind howled and snow piled against yurt walls, the people of Khara Uul listened to the earth’s slow breathing beneath them—steady, watchful, but calm.

The guardian on the hill stood deep in drifts, snow crowning its stone head like a white headdress, quartz eyes half-closed in winter sleep.

Balance held, rooted deep in respect and the promise of new life stirring beneath furs and snow alike.

The child came into the world on the darkest night of winter, when the sun barely skimmed the horizon for a few hours and the stars burned cold and close. Snow fell thick and silent outside the yurt, muffling the wind’s howl, while inside the fire roared high and herbs smoked in a clay bowl to ease the mother’s pain. Irina labored with the same fierce

determination she brought to herding, gripping Nikolai's hand hard enough to leave marks, refusing the old women's offers to sing her into trance.

"She'll come on her own terms," Irina gasped between contractions, sweat freezing on her brow despite the heat.

And she did. Just before dawn, as the fire burned low and the women murmured encouragement, a strong cry pierced the yurt—a girl, small but loud, with a tuft of dark hair and fists already clenched like she meant to fight the cold from birth.

They named her Sargy, after an ancient heroine in Vasily's stories who outran spirits across frozen rivers. Nikolai wrapped mother and daughter in soft furs, his eyes shining with tears he didn't bother to hide. Irina, exhausted but triumphant, held the baby close, tracing her tiny features with one finger.

"Strong roots," she whispered, echoing Nikolai's words from the hill. "And a voice to wake the earth if needed."

News spread through the village by morning. Pavel brought the first gift—a tiny axe head carved from reindeer antler, hung on a leather cord for when she was older. Timur sang a new verse outside the yurt door, his voice carrying over the snow: words of welcome for new life, asking the guardians above and below to watch over her path. Lena slipped in quietly with a crown of dried summer flowers she had saved, placing it gently on the cradle board Nikolai had carved with protective faces at each corner.

Vasily came last, slow and bundled against the cold, pipe unlit in his hand. He peered at the sleeping infant, clouded eyes softening.

"She has your fire, Irina," he said. "And Nikolai's steady hands. Good. The earth will listen when she sings."

Outside, the storm eased as if in answer. Snow stopped falling, and a thin shaft of pale sunlight broke through the clouds, glinting off the endless white. Reindeer lowed softly in the corral, sensing the shift in the world.

That night, the village held a quiet naming feast—no drums or dancing in the deep cold, but warm broth passed hand to hand, stories told in low voices around each yurt fire. Vasily spoke of the old days, when children born in deepest winter were marked by the spirits as bridges between worlds. Timur added that the earth had stirred gently at the moment of birth—a warm pulse felt through the yurt floor, like approval.

Pavel sat near Nikolai, sharing a cup of butter tea.

"She'll need a strong uncle to teach her axe work," he said gruffly. "When she's big enough."

Nikolai smiled.

“And a strong aunt to teach her the herd calls. We’ll all teach her.”

Irina, resting with Sargy at her breast, listened to the voices around her. The yurt smelled of milk, smoke, and new life. Outside, the stars wheeled in their ancient paths, and far off on Khara Uul hill, the guardian stood deep in snow, quartz eyes catching stray moonlight.

Deep below, the earth breathed slow and steady—content with the new thread woven into the great pattern, lulled by the faint, fierce cry that had greeted the darkest night.

Balance held, strengthened by a small new heart beating fierce against the winter cold.

Spring returned with its usual drama—rivers roaring in full flood, snow retreating in patchy surrender to reveal mud and new green. The reindeer migration began, the herd moving north to calving grounds on the open tundra, bells tinkling like distant rain. Khara Uul packed up yurts into sleds, following the ancient paths worn deep by generations of hooves and boots. Sargy, now toddling on sturdy legs, rode strapped to Irina’s back in a cradle board carved by Nikolai, her dark eyes wide at the vast world unfolding.

The journey took ten days of steady travel, crossing swollen streams on makeshift bridges of logs and ice, camping each night in temporary shelters of hides and branches. Timur walked at the herd’s edge, singing softly to calm restless animals and—some whispered—to soothe whatever watched from below. Pavel scouted ahead, axe always ready, his old restlessness channeled into protection. Vasily rode on a sled, bundled warm, telling stories to the children clustered around him.

They reached the summer pastures under a sky vast and blue, the ground carpeted in fresh grass and tiny flowers. Reindeer spread out eagerly, calves born along the way leaping on wobbly legs. Yurts rose in the familiar circle, smoke holes facing east to greet the sun’s long path.

Sargy’s first summer was one of endless light and motion. She learned to walk properly on the soft tundra, chasing butterflies and plucking flowers under Lena’s watchful eye. Irina herded with the baby often tied to her chest, teaching her early to listen for the herd’s calls. Nikolai carved new protective faces on driftwood and boundary stones, embedding them along the camp’s edge.

One evening, as the sun dipped low but lingered on the horizon, Timur gathered the village by the central fire. His face was serious, the quiet certainty in his eyes deeper than ever.

“I dreamed last night,” he said, his voice carrying over the crackle of flames. “The guardian on Khara Uul hill spoke—not in words, but feeling. It is content, but it warns: change comes from the south. Metal and smoke, voices not ours. The earth feels footsteps it does not know.”

Vasily puffed his pipe slowly. “Traders? Russians again?”

Timur shook his head. “More than traders. Many feet. Wood cutters that bite the trees. They also seek what lies deep—stone and metal. The guardian asks us to remember louder. Sing stronger. Carve deeper.”

Irina shifted Sargy on her lap, the child asleep against her breast. “We are far north in summer. They may not reach here soon.”

Pavel leaned forward, axe across his knees. “But they will come eventually. Roads follow rivers. Rivers lead here.”

Nikolai traced a pattern in the dirt with his knife tip—a small watchful face. “Then we prepare. Teach the children more songs. Carve more guardians along the paths. When they come, we meet them with respect for the land, not fear.”

The village murmured agreement. Plans formed quietly: extra offerings at known sacred sites, new faces carved on prominent rocks, songs woven with warnings for strangers.

That night, under the endless twilight, Timur led the strongest singers—Lena now among them—to the edge of the pasture. They faced south, voices rising in the old earth song, richer and more layered than ever. Sargy stirred in her sleep, tiny fist clenching as though already learning the rhythm.

Far to the south, on distant Khara Uul hill, the great idol stood alone under the summer sun, moss thick at its base, flowers blooming defiantly around stone feet. A faint tremor ran through the ground—acknowledgment, perhaps warning.

The earth listened.

The people sang louder.

And in the vast taiga, balance held—fragile now, like thin ice over deep water, but held by voices raised in ancient respect against the coming change.

Years flowed onward like the great rivers that carved the taiga—slow, relentless, shaping everything in their path. Sargy grew tall and strong, her mother’s fierce will tempered by her father’s quiet patience. By her tenth summer she could herd with the best, calling reindeer by name and reading wind shifts in the grass. Her voice carried the earth song clearest of all, joined often by Lena—now a young woman—and the children who followed them like ducklings.

The village endured, moving with the seasons, honoring the guardian on Khara Uul hill with offerings each dark moon. The great idol stood weathered but unbroken, moss and vines claiming it more each year until it seemed less carved stone and more living outgrowth of the earth itself. Small faces multiplied along paths and riverbanks, carved by generations of hands—some skilled like Nikolai’s, others childish but earnest.

Change came gradually, as Timur had dreamed. First traders more often, bringing steel knives and cloth in exchange for furs. Then surveyors with strange instruments, marking lines on paper maps that paid no heed to sacred sites. Roads pushed closer, narrow tracks at first, then wider scars where digging growled and bit the ground.

The people of Khara Uul watched warily but did not flee. Vasily passed in his ninety-second winter, buried with honors facing the hill, his pipe and staff laid beside him. Irina took his place as elder, voice steady as stone when speaking to outsiders. Nikolai's carvings became gifts—small guardians offered to traders with quiet words.

"Respect the land that feeds us all."

Pavel married Lena when she came of age, their union blessed with two strong sons who learned axe and song in equal measure. Timur lived long, his dusk songs a beacon until his voice grew thin and he walked into the forest one autumn eve, saying only:

"The earth calls me home."

They found no body, only fresh flowers blooming in his footprints.

Sargy, now a woman with braids threaded in red and a staff of her own, led the last great trek to the hill. The guardian stood half-hidden in young birch that had grown around it, quartz eyes still gleaming through leaves. She poured milk, laid smoked fish, sang the oldest verses her grandfather Vasily had taught.

The ground answered with a deep, sorrowful rumble—not anger, but farewell.

That winter, the village moved farther north, following reindeer paths deeper into untouched taiga. They left the great idol standing, a silent watcher over lands soon changed forever.

Wherever new yurts rose, small faces were carved on trees and stones. Milk was poured for the earth. Voices rose at dusk, weaving the ancient balance into new places.

The guardian on Khara Uul remained, slowly claimed by roots and moss, until one day it stood indistinguishable from the hill itself—stone returned to earth, watching still.

And in the vast, enduring taiga, the people moved on—nomads eternal, keepers of memory, singing to whatever lay below that the pact, though strained, was not forgotten.

The earth listened.

The song continued.

Whispers of the Border Walker

In the remotest reaches of the northern taiga, where the great Yenisei River bends like a sleeping serpent and the forest grows so dense that sunlight touches the ground only in thin spears, lived a solitary shaman known to the few Evenki herders who passed his territory as Böö Khan—Shaman of the Deep Dream. His real name had been forgotten even by himself, swallowed long ago by the spirits he served. He dwelt in a small, smoke-blackened chum pitched beneath a solitary black larch whose trunk was twisted by centuries of wind into the shape of a watching figure.

Böö Khan was a man half in this world and half in another. His body was lean and sinewy, skin weathered to the color of old leather, marked with scars from bear claws and self-inflicted cuts made during visions. His hair hung in matted ropes threaded with raven feathers and tiny bones that rattled when he moved. He wore a coat of reindeer hide hung with leather straps, iron pendants, and dried mushrooms strung like beads. His face was perpetually smeared with soot and fat, eyes wild and bright as a wolf's, sometimes seeing what others could not.

Inside his tent hung his great drum—reindeer skin stretched over larch wood, painted with symbols of the three worlds: upper sky with eagle feathers, middle earth with reindeer tracks, lower depths with coiling roots. Bundles of dried herbs and red-capped fly agaric hung from the poles, filling the air with their sharp, earthy scent. The smoke hole was always open, letting in the cold breath of the forest and releasing clouds of juniper and wild rosemary burned to keep malevolent spirits at bay.

Böö Khan lived on the edge of dream. Each day he gathered what the forest offered: inner bark of willow chewed for its bitter fire, leaves of wild ledum brewed into dark tea that loosened the soul from the body, roots of valerian dug with bare hands. But his true gateway was the fly agaric—dried carefully on strings above the fire, then eaten slowly on an empty stomach or brewed into a thick red broth. When the mushroom took hold, the tent walls dissolved, the drum began to beat itself, and he walked paths no ordinary foot could tread.

On this night, deep in winter when the moon was hidden and stars crowded the black sky like watchful eyes, Böö Khan sat cross-legged before his small fire. Snow sifted through the smoke hole, melting on his bare shoulders. He chewed three large caps of fly agaric slowly, deliberately, letting the bitter juice coat his tongue. The drum lay across his lap, waiting.

As the warmth spread through his limbs, the fire's flames stretched upward into impossible shapes—trees of light, rivers of flame. His body grew heavy, then weightless. The tent fell away, and he stood in the lower world: a vast cavern lit by glowing fungi, roots hanging like

serpents from the ceiling. There, waiting as always, were the entities that knew him by scent.

A great bear spirit lumbered forward, fur matted with earth, eyes deep pools of night. Beside it slithered a serpent of black water, scales reflecting visions of drowned forests. Above them hovered a raven made of shadow, wings dripping stars.

They did not speak with voices, but with knowing. The bear pressed its massive head against Böö Khan's chest, sharing the slow thunder of its heart. The serpent coiled around his legs, cold and comforting. The raven settled on his shoulder, whispering images directly into his mind: reindeer running across endless snow, rivers breaking free in spring, children yet unborn learning the drum's rhythm.

He danced with them there in the dream cavern, body jerking in the tent while his spirit spun and leaped. The drum beat itself—boom, boom, boom—calling ancestors whose names tasted like smoke on his tongue.



Hours passed, or days. Time lost meaning.

When the vision finally released him, he crawled from the tent on all fours into the snow, naked despite the killing cold, steam rising from his skin. The forest was black and silent around him, stars glittering between the larch branches. He ran then—berserk, howling like a wolf, crashing through deep drifts until strength failed and he collapsed face-down in the snow, breath freezing on his beard.

Darkness closed in.

But he did not freeze alone.

From the shadows came wolves—real wolves, silver and gray, eyes reflecting starlight. They circled him quietly, no growl, no bared fang. One large female, heavy with winter coat, lay beside him, pressing her warm flank to his shivering body. Others sat in a silent ring, guardians of the border walker who spoke their language in dreams.

Böö Khan drifted half-conscious, feeling the she-wolf's heartbeat against his ribs, her breath warm on his neck. In that place between worlds, he understood: they had come not to eat, but to keep the bridge alive.

The night passed. Dawn's pale light found him still breathing, snow melted in a circle around man and wolves. The pack rose as one and melted back into the forest without sound.

Böö Khan staggered to his feet, naked and filthy, and laughed—a wild, cracked sound that echoed through the empty trees.

He had walked the edge again.

And returned.

Summer came fierce and brief, the sun circling high and refusing to set for weeks. The taiga steamed under its gaze, moss swelling thick and soft, rivers running cold and clear from melting permafrost. Böö Khan shed his heavy coat, wearing only leather straps across his chest and loins, feathers and bones rattling with every movement. Dirt and deer fat caked his skin in a thick layer, protection against the clouds of mosquitoes that rose in black swarms from every puddle.

He spent days crawling through the forest on all fours, nose to the ground like a bear awakening from hibernation. Moss was his bed, his food, his blanket—he rolled in it until green stained his skin, chewing tender shoots and pale fungi that pushed through the carpet. Insects became sustenance: fat beetle larvae dug from rotten logs, ants licked from bark with a quick tongue, their sharp taste a spark that sharpened visions. He mimicked the creatures around him—growling low like a wolverine, clicking his tongue like a squirrel, hooting deep as an eagle owl—until the forest answered in kind, birds calling back from hidden branches.

One blazing afternoon he found a deep lake, its water black and still, reflecting the endless sky like polished obsidian. The fly agaric still lingered in his blood from the night before, making the surface ripple with unseen currents. He stripped the last straps from his body, smeared fresh deer fat across his chest and limbs until he gleamed, then walked naked into the water. The cold struck like knives, stealing breath, but he dove deep—deeper than any sane man would in summer, let alone winter's memory.

Down he went, lungs burning, eyes open in the dark water. Fish darted away like silver spirits. At the bottom, among smooth stones and tangled roots, lay what he sought: a shaman stone, flat and black, etched naturally with spirals that caught faint light. It pulsed warm against his palm, alive with the lake's heart. He clutched it and kicked upward, breaking the surface with a gasp that echoed across the empty water.

On the shore he lay panting, stone pressed to his forehead, fat and water mixing with mud until he was one with the earth again. The sun dried him slowly, insects buzzing hymns around his ears.

Nights were for dancing. When the moon hid its face and stars ruled alone, Böö Khan emerged from his tent wild-eyed and drumming. The great drum boomed under his fists—rhythms older than words, calling the three worlds to witness. He danced naked in the clearing beneath the black larch, feet stamping snow-soft moss, body twisting in impossible ways as feathers whipped the air. He sang in a voice cracked and raw, words from no human tongue but understood by root and stone.

Sometimes he crawled to the ancient idol hidden deeper in the forest—a rough stone figure half-buried in a mound, its face carved into a snarling demon with iron teeth and one burning eye. There he prostrated himself, rolling in the dirt before it, smearing blood from self-cut palms across the cold stone. He howled at it on all fours, mimicking wolf and bear and raven until the forest itself seemed to howl back.

One dawn, after a night of ledum tea and willow bark chewed to bitterness, he lay face-down in a meadow with his ear pressed to the ground. The earth's slow heartbeat thrummed against his cheek—deep, patient, ancient. Whispers rose through soil and root: spirits of the lower world speaking in the language of stone grinding stone, water seeping through permafrost, trees drinking deep.

“Live with us, not on us. Take only what returns. Sing when you take, dance when you give.”

He listened until the sun climbed high, body still as death, breath matching the earth's rhythm.

When he rose, dirt cascaded from his hair and beard. He laughed again—that wild, cracked sound—and crawled back toward his tent, leaving human-shaped prints that filled slowly with dew.

The black larch watched over him, twisted trunk like a guardian spirit, needles whispering approval.

Böö Khan lived half in dream, half in flesh—bridge between worlds, mad to some, sacred to others.

And the forest kept him, as it keeps all who truly listen.

Autumn returned with its sharp bite, turning leaves to flame and frost to silver on every blade of grass. Rivers ran lower, exposing smooth stones that gleamed like bones in the pale sun. Böö Khan felt the shift in his blood—the pull toward deeper visions as the world prepared for sleep. He gathered the last fly agaric before the snows, selecting only the brightest red caps, drying them slowly over smoldering juniper until they curled like tiny fists.

One evening, as wind moaned through the black larch and stripped needles rained down like dark snow, he prepared the strongest brew yet. Three large caps steeped in hot water from the river, mixed with crushed ledum leaves and a pinch of willow bark. He drank it in his tent, smoke thick from burning herbs, the great drum resting silent beside him.

The vision came swift and fierce.

The tent walls melted into roots that coiled around his body, pulling him downward. He fell—not painfully, but inevitably—through layers of earth until he stood in the middle world’s shadow realm: a vast forest of stone trees, rivers of black water, animals made of mist and memory. The bear spirit waited again, larger now, fur bristling with frost. The serpent rose from a pool, eyes like frozen stars. The raven perched on a branch of petrified wood, wings spreading wide enough to blot the dim light.

They led him deeper, to a clearing where the demon idol from the waking forest stood replicated—taller, more terrible, its single eye burning with red fire. Roots burst from the ground to bind his wrists and ankles, dragging him toward its snarling mouth.

Böö Khan did not fight. He sang—the raw, cracked song of submission and power, drum beating in his chest though his hands were bound. The idol’s eye dimmed. Roots loosened. The spirits circled closer, pressing images into his mind: a great imbalance coming, metal teeth biting the earth far south, smoke choking the sky, rivers poisoned. The forest weeping blood from wounded trunks.

“Sing louder.”

The bear’s command carried without sound.

“Dance wilder. The bridge must hold.”

He awoke gasping in the tent, smoke stinging his eyes, body slick with sweat that froze instantly as he crawled outside. Night had fallen hard, moonless and star-thick. The fly agaric still thrummed in his veins, urging movement.

He ran.

Naked again, drum left behind, he crashed through the forest on all fours—howling, snarling, feathers lost from his hair scattering like black snow. Branches clawed his skin,

blood mixing with dirt and old fat. He rolled in leaf litter, smeared mud across his chest in spiral patterns, mimicking the shaman stone's etchings.

Hours blurred. Strength failed near a small stream frozen at the edges. He collapsed on the bank, breath ragged, vision swimming between worlds. Cold crept in, numbing fingers and toes.

The wolves came again.

Silent as shadows, the same pack—or their kin—emerged from the trees. The large female approached first, nose touching his cheek, breath warm and smelling of fresh kill. She lay beside him once more, body heat seeping into his shivering frame. Others formed the circle, yellow eyes reflecting starlight, ears pricked toward any danger.

In that half-dream state, Böö Khan heard them speak—not words, but knowing. The female's heartbeat synced with his, steady and strong. Images passed: pups born in spring dens, hunts under full moons, the pack's ancient claim to this forest long before humans walked upright.

"You are pack. We guard the bridge."

He slept then, truly slept, curled against wolf warmth while snow began to fall soft and silent.

Dawn found him alone again, wolves vanished like mist. Fresh snow covered their prints, but warmth lingered in his bones. He rose stiff but alive, laughing that cracked laugh into the gray light.

He drank from the stream—ice-cold water straight from the earth's veins—then crawled home on all fours, leaving bloody handprints that froze solid behind him.

The black larch greeted him with a rustle of needles, as though approving his return.

Böö Khan entered his tent, fed the fire, and began to dry new mushrooms.

The visions grew stronger. The bridge must hold.

Winter locked the taiga in its deepest grip, snow piling high against the black larch until only the upper branches showed like dark fingers against the white sky. Rivers froze solid, their surfaces humped and cracked like the backs of sleeping beasts. Böö Khan moved through this frozen world like a shadow, his breath freezing in icicles on his beard, body wrapped only in the ragged reindeer coat hung with frozen straps and rattling bones.

He ate little now—strips of inner pine bark scraped with dirty nails, chewed slowly for the faint sweetness that kept starvation at bay. Tea brewed from frozen ledum twigs and willow buds, bitter and dark, drunk steaming from a wooden cup carved from a single burl. The fly

agaric waited in bundles, saved for the longest nights when the veil between worlds thinned to nothing.

One such night, when wind howled like mourning spirits and snow drove horizontal through the trees, Böö Khan built the smoke sauna inside his tent. He heated river stones in the fire until they glowed red, then poured water mixed with crushed juniper and wild rosemary over them. Steam exploded upward, thick and choking, filling the small space until the walls sweated and smoke poured from the hole in swirling clouds. He sat naked in the heat, sweat cutting channels through layers of dirt and fat, driving out any bad spirits that might cling to his skin.

The drum lay ready. When the steam peaked and his head swam from heat and lack of air, he seized it and beat—fierce, arrhythmic at first, then settling into the ancient pulse that called the lower world. Sweat flew from his arms with each strike. He sang the smoke song, voice hoarse and cracking, words that banished malice and invited ancestors.

The tent became a womb of heat and vapor. Visions flickered in the steam: faces of long-dead shamans, eyes white as snow, mouths moving in silent advice. The bear spirit appeared again, massive in the small space, pressing hot breath against his face. The serpent coiled through the smoke, scales hissing against hot stones.

He rolled out into the snow when the heat became unbearable—body steaming like a fresh-killed animal, collapsing face-first into the drift. Cold shocked him awake, snow packing into every crease of skin. He lay there laughing until tears froze on his cheeks, then crawled back inside to collapse on furs, drum clutched to his chest like a child.

Days later, on a morning when the air was so cold it burned the lungs, he heard the crow.

He was crawling along a frozen stream, ear to the ice, listening for water spirits trapped below. A single crow landed on a nearby branch, black against white, head cocked. It cawed once—sharp, deliberate—then again in a rhythm that matched the drum he carried in his mind.

Böö Khan froze, listening not with ears but with the whole body.

The crow spoke.

Not words, but wisdom poured directly into his skull: images of the forest in balance—wolves taking only the weak reindeer, rivers giving fish but demanding respect, trees falling to make room for new growth. Humans as threads in the weaving, not masters. Take too much, cut too deep, and the weaving unravels.

Live with the land's breath, the crow said. Not against it. Sing when you take. Dance when you give. The earth forgives, but only so long.

It cawed once more—a harsh, approving sound—and flew off into the white sky.

Böö Khan remained kneeling in the snow long after, tears freezing on his dirty cheeks. He pressed his forehead to the ice, whispering thanks in the old tongue.

That night he danced again under starlight, naked and steaming from the sauna, drum beating slow and steady. He danced for the crow's wisdom, for the wolves that guarded him, for the earth that both fed and tested him.

The black larch stood witness, needles coated in hoarfrost, twisted trunk seeming to nod in time.

Böö Khan spun until he fell, laughing into the snow.

The bridge held. For now.

Spring thawed the world in fits and starts—snow melting into rushing streams one day, only to freeze again the next under a cruel frost. The black larch dripped constantly, its needles darkening as sap rose. Böö Khan emerged from winter thinner, eyes brighter, skin cracked like old bark but alive with the fire of survival. He shed the heavy coat entirely, wearing only the leather straps and feathers, letting cold wind and warm sun scour him clean.

He bathed daily now in the half-frozen rivers. The water struck like spears of ice, shocking breath from his lungs, but he dove deep—smearing deer fat thick across chest and limbs first so the cold could not claim him too quickly. He scrubbed with handfuls of sand and moss until old dirt and winter's grime sloughed away in black clouds. Emerging steaming, he rolled in fresh mud on the bank, letting the earth reclaim him in a new layer.

One bright morning he returned to the deep lake of summer memory. Ice still rimmed its edges, thin and treacherous, but the center lay open and black. The fly agaric from autumn called to him—he ate two small dried caps raw, chewing slowly as he stood on the shore. The world sharpened: colors too vivid, sounds layered with meaning, the lake's surface rippling with unseen eyes watching.

He smeared fat again, thick and glistening, then walked into the water until it reached his chest. Cold burned, but the mushroom fire in his blood answered. He dove.

Down into the dark, lungs already aching, eyes wide. He grabbed some algae, kicking upward, he broke the surface with a roar that scattered ravens from nearby trees.

On the shore he lay gasping, algae pressed into his mouth, fat and water mixing with mud until he was caked head to toe. The mushroom took full hold then—the lake became a mirror to the lower world, reflections showing the serpent spirit rising to greet him, scales flashing green and black. It wrapped around his muddy body, cold as the water, whispering of hidden springs and the deep veins where earth's blood flowed.

He danced there on the muddy bank, a stone clutched to his chest, feet slipping in the slick, body twisting in patterns that mimicked the serpent's coils. He sang the water song—voice

raw and broken, words tasting of mud and fat. Birds answered from the trees: crows with their harsh wisdom, eagles screaming high overhead, tiny warblers threading melody through the chaos.

When strength failed, he crawled to a patch of soft moss and lay with ear to ground again. The whispers rose clearer than ever: spirits of root and stone speaking of the coming summer's plent. Remember us, they urged. Sing when you take. Dance when you give.

He stayed until dusk, body drying into a cracked mud shell, stone warm against his skin.

Night brought the drum. He returned to the tent, smoke thick from fresh juniper, and beat rhythms that called the wolf pack. They came—not in flesh this time, but in vision—circling the fire's glow, eyes yellow and steady.

He drummed until fingers bled, sang until voice gave out, then crawled outside to roll in fresh dirt under starlight, feathers matted, body filthy once more.

The black larch stood over him, dripping meltwater like tears or blessings.

Böö Khan laughed into the night—that wild, cracked sound carrying far through the thawing forest.

He was the bridge. Filthy, sacred. And the worlds breathed through him.

Summer's peak brought the longest days, the sun barely brushing the horizon before rising again, turning the taiga into a green furnace. Moss swelled thick and wet underfoot, rivers ran high and wild, mosquitoes rose in humming clouds that followed every warm body. Böö Khan thrived in the heat, his dirt-caked skin a living armor against the biting hordes. He moved through the forest naked most days, leather straps and feathers abandoned in the tent, body glistening with fresh deer fat that smelled sharp and animal in the humid air.

He ate what the season offered without hesitation: pale grubs dug from under bark, sweet ants harvested by the handful and crunched like berries, tender shoots of fireweed chewed as he crawled. He brewed tea from bog rosemary and wild ledum, dark and strong, drinking it scalding from a birch-bark cup. The fly agaric he saved for special nights, but the constant low dose of other plants kept him half in dream—colors too bright, sounds layered with spirit voices, every leaf whispering secrets.

One sweltering afternoon he found a meadow ringed by ancient larches, the ground carpeted in thick reindeer moss pale as bone. The air shimmered with heat, insects droning a constant hymn. He dropped to all fours and crawled into the center, rolling until moss clung to every inch of skin. Then he lay flat, ear pressed to the earth again, listening for the deeper songs.

The whispers rose clear and urgent: spirits of root and stone speaking of the great wounding coming from the south—teeth gnawing the land, black smoke poisoning rivers, trees falling

without song or offering. The bear spirit's voice rumbled through the ground like distant thunder: The bridge strains. Sing louder, walk deeper, or it breaks.

Böö Khan stayed until dusk, body baking in the sun, moss drying into a second skin. When he rose, he danced—wild and spinning, arms flung wide, feet stamping patterns that matched the earth's heartbeat. He mimicked every animal he knew: eagle screech, wolf howl, reindeer snort, raven croak—voice cracking across the meadow until birds answered from the trees.

Night brought no darkness, only a pale twilight. He crawled to the demon idol in its hidden mound, prostrating himself before the snarling stone face. He rolled in the dirt there, smearing blood from fresh cuts on his palms across the idol's iron teeth, howling on all fours until his throat bled. The stone seemed to warm under his touch, the single carved eye glowing faintly in the dim light.

He drummed that night inside the tent, smoke thick from burning herbs and fat. The great drum boomed under bleeding fingers, rhythms calling the wolf pack in vision.

When the drum fell silent, he crawled outside and lay beneath the black larch, ear to root, listening to the tree's slow breath. The crow returned, perching on a low branch, cawing the same wisdom as before: live with the land's breath, not against it.

Böö Khan laughed into the twilight—that wild, cracked sound echoing through the endless green.

He rose and ran berserk through the forest, crashing through brush, diving into streams to cool the fire in his blood, emerging muddy and laughing harder.

The bridge strained. But he held it—filthy, half in dream, singing and dancing and listening with every scarred inch of his body. The taiga kept him close, roots twining around the tent poles, moss creeping over the threshold.

And the spirits watched, waiting to see if one man's madness could balance the coming wound.

The first signs of autumn crept in early that year—nights growing sharper, leaves on birch turning pale gold before their brief blaze. Rivers ran colder, fish moving deeper, reindeer herds beginning to gather for the southward drift. Böö Khan felt the shift like an ache in his bones, the pull toward the long dark when visions came easiest and the veil thinned to smoke.

He prepared with ritual intensity. Bundles of fly agaric hung thick from the tent poles, drying to perfect potency. He chewed willow bark daily for the fire in his blood, brewed ledum tea so strong it stained his teeth black. Deer fat was rendered fresh, stored in bladders for the

winter baths and smears. The great drum received new paintings—spirals of red ochre mixed with blood from his palm, symbols of the straining bridge.

One evening, as wind stripped the first leaves from the black larch and scattered them like warnings, he ate the strongest dose yet: five large caps, dried and powdered, mixed into a paste with reindeer fat and swallowed whole. He sat naked in the thickening smoke of the tent, drum across his lap, waiting.

The vision struck like lightning.

The tent dissolved into roots that dragged him downward, faster than ever. He fell through layers of earth—past frozen permafrost, past ancient bones of mammoths, past rivers of black water—until he landed in the deepest lower world: a cavern vast as the sky, lit by glowing crystals that pulsed like hearts. There waited the entities, larger and more urgent.

The shadow spirit loomed, form writhing with tendrils of freezing mist, howling without voice. The wraith coiled across the cavern floor, edges frayed and dripping void-black essence. The specter burst into a tempest of tattered wings, eyes blazing with reflected flames from the south.

They showed him the wound: far away, earth creatures gnawing the taiga's flesh, rivers choked with ice, smoke rising thick enough to blot the stars. Spirits fleeing deeper, ancestors weeping in forgotten graves. The bridge cracking—thin fissures spreading from the south like ice breaking in spring.

Sing louder, the spirit thundered. Dance until blood flows. The essence must hold the world together.

Böö Khan sang then—in the vision and in the tent—voice raw and tearing, drum beating until skin split and blood spattered the hide. He danced in the cavern, body jerking in impossible contortions, feet bleeding on crystal shards. The entities joined: wraith rearing, shadow spirit writhing, specter diving through his chest.

He awoke hours later collapsed outside the tent, snow already falling soft and steady—the first of the season. Naked, bloody, steaming in the cold. The drum lay beside him, cracked but still whole.

He ran berserk into the whitening forest, howling until lungs burned, crashing through brush until strength failed near the frozen stream. He collapsed again, face in snow, vision swimming.

In that half-death warmth, he understood the crow's wisdom deeper: live with the land's breath, even when it gasps in pain. The knowledge was his gift—to feel the wound before it fully opened, to sing against the breaking.

Snow fell thicker, covering them in a white blanket.

Dawn found him alone again, but alive and warm beneath a thin crust of snow. He rose laughing—that wild, cracked sound now edged with grief—and crawled home through the fresh powder, leaving a trail of bloody handprints that filled slowly behind him.

Inside the tent he fed the fire, smeared fresh fat and mud across his scars, and began repairing the drum with sinew and blood.

Winter closed in. The visions would grow stronger. The bridge strained. But Böö Khan held it—filthy, bleeding, half-mad guardian of the thinning veil. The black larch stood over him, branches heavy with snow, twisted trunk seeming to lean closer in solidarity.

And the earth whispered through the coming dark: Sing. Sing until the wound heals or we all break.

Winter deepened into its blackest heart, the sun gone for weeks, only a pale glow on the southern horizon at midday. Snow piled higher than the tent roof, forcing Böö Khan to dig tunnels to the woodpile and stream. Cold was a living thing, creeping through every crack, freezing breath into hoarfrost on his beard and the drum's hide. He burned fat lamps constantly, the tent thick with smoke and the sharp stink of rendering deer blubber.

He lived on bark and memory now—inner willow scraped thin, pine cambium chewed to paste, the last of the fly agaric saved for the darkest nights. His body was gaunt, ribs showing like roots under scarred skin, but his eyes burned brighter than ever, seeing through walls into the spirit worlds.

On the longest night, when stars hung low and the wind stilled to an eerie hush, he performed the great smoke cleansing. Stones heated for hours glowed white in the fire pit. He poured water infused with every sacred herb he possessed—juniper, rosemary, ledum, bog myrtle—until steam filled the tent like a living cloud. Naked and sweating, he beat the drum with blood-cracked hands, singing the banishment song that drove out all malice.

The smoke became entities: ancestors with faces of bark and bone, spirits of wolf and raven swirling around him. They pressed close, sharing breath, warning of the wound spreading faster now—metal teeth closer, smoke thicker, rivers bleeding black.

He rolled out into the snow when the heat became unbearable—body steaming in the killing cold, collapsing face-down in a drift deeper than his height. Snow packed into his mouth and ears, cold burning lungs. He laughed into it—that cracked, grieving sound—then lay still, inviting death or vision.

He walked the lower world again. The bear spirit carried him on its back through tunnels of ice, showing the cracking bridge—fissures glowing red from southern fires. The serpent wept black tears that froze into obsidian shards. The raven screamed warnings that tasted of blood.

“Hold longer,” they urged. “Bridge walker, hold until the song reaches others.”

Inside, he fed the fire with the last precious logs, smeared fresh fat across his frozen skin, and repaired the drum’s bloodstained hide with sinew threaded through bone needle.

He sang then—a low, continuous drone that carried through the snow-muffled forest, calling any who might listen: herders far off, spirits deep below, the wounded earth itself.

The black larch stood over the buried tent, branches heavy with snow, twisted trunk seeming to bow under the weight of winter and warning.

Böö Khan sang through the long dark, voice cracking but unbroken. The bridge strained to its limit. But the shaman held it—one filthy, freezing body against the coming break.

And in the deepest cold, the earth whispered back:

“We hear you. We hear.”

The returning sun was only a promise—a thin band of light on the southern horizon that grew a finger’s breadth each day. Snow still lay deep, crusted and hard from wind, but the coldest nights had passed. Böö Khan felt the shift in his marrow: the earth stirring beneath its white blanket, spirits stretching after long sleep. His body was wasted from winter—skin stretched tight over bone, scars livid against pallor—but the fire in his eyes burned undimmed.

He emerged more often now, crawling from the snow-buried tent into the pale light. The black larch’s branches sagged under melting snow, dripping constantly onto the roof like slow tears. He lay beneath it naked, letting icy drops strike his chest and face, laughing when they froze on his skin. Then he rolled in the crusted snow, packing it into every crevice until he was a snow creature himself, only eyes and mouth showing dark.

One morning he heard the first true bird song—a lone raven croaking from high in the larch, voice rough with winter rust. Böö Khan froze on all fours, head cocked like a wolf. The raven spoke again, the same wisdom as before but urgent now:

The wound bleeds closer. Metal teeth taste the roots. Sing before the song is silenced.

He answered with a howl that scattered snow from branches, then crawled to the demon idol’s mound. The stone face peered from a drift, one eye half-covered, snarling mouth packed with ice. He dug it free with bare hands, nails splitting, blood smearing the stone as he cleared snow from its chest. Then he prostrated himself, rolling in the dirt revealed beneath the melt, cutting fresh patterns on his arms with a flint shard and pressing blood to the idol’s teeth.

The stone warmed under his touch—faint but real. A low rumble rose from deep below, not anger but acknowledgment.

That night he ate the last large dose of fly agaric—four caps brewed into thick broth, drunk scalding by the fire. Smoke filled the tent from burning fat and herbs; the drum waited, hide tight from the dry cold.

The vision came immediate and violent.

The sun returned fully at last, climbing higher each day, melting snow into roaring streams that carved new paths through the taiga. The black larch stood dripping, needles dark and glossy, roots drinking deep of the flood. Böö Khan emerged from his winter den like a creature reborn—gaunt as a skeleton, skin pale beneath cracks of old mud, but moving with the fierce energy of spring itself.

He bathed constantly now, diving into the half-frozen rivers and lakes, scrubbing with sand and moss until blood tinged the water. Deer fat was smeared fresh and thick, gleaming in the strengthening sun, protection against the last biting winds and the mosquitoes already hatching in swarms. He crawled through the thawing forest on all fours, eating new growth as he went: tender birch leaves, sour sorrel shoots, pale fungi pushing through the rot. Insects returned in force—he crunched beetles and larvae with relish, their juices sharp on his tongue.

Böö Khan walked south for the first time in years, upright on two legs though his gait was strange—lurching, swaying, sometimes dropping to all fours when the earth called too strongly. The shaman stone hung heavy around his neck on a sinew cord, warm against his bare chest. Mud and fat caked his skin in thick layers, feathers and bones rattling in his matted hair. He carried nothing else—no drum, no tent, no food beyond what the land offered as he moved.

The taiga changed as he traveled. At first familiar—endless larch and birch, moss soft underfoot, rivers clear and cold. He drank from them, diving deep to greet water spirits that rose to coil around his scarred body. He crawled through meadows, eating new shoots and insects, rolling in mud to renew his armor.

He sang as he walked—the warning song, voice cracked and raw, carrying ahead like a storm wind. Birds answered at first, then fell silent as the scarred land thickened.

The earth whispered behind him, weaker but hopeful:

One heard. Find more. Find more.

Guard the deep north, her presence said.

She turned and melted back into the green shadows.

Böö Khan walked on alone.